Ajit Keshary Ray

PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER



Edited by Dinanath Pathy

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Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi
in collaboration with
Working Artists Association of Orissa
Sole Distributors
Harman Publishing House, New Delhi

Orissan Art and Artists Series - One
Ajit Keshary Ray *Portrait of a Painter*
General Editor Dinanath Pathy

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The manuscript of this monograph has been prepared at
Alice Boner Institute Varanasi

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PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER
2004

Layout , Design and Photo
Ramahari Jena and Dillip Kumar Tripathy

Cover
Flower Vase, Ajit Keshari Ray, *Oil on Canvas*

Printed at
Raj Press
R-3, Inderpuri, New Delhi

Sole Distributors
Harman Publishing House
A-23, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase-II, New Delhi - 110028

Price Rs. 300.00

For
Geeta
Bapi
Kisu
and
Avipsa
who is no more

Autobiographer's Note

In the Shantiniketan tradition, artists tend to write. Beginning with Rabindranath, Abanindranath, Gaganendra, Nandalal, Binod Behari and K.G. Subramanyan, each artist has written about himself and art. In Orissa the situation has remained different. Here, art is not seen in totality but in fragmentations. Initially therefore I was hesitant in taking up writing lest I might be misunderstood of making statements about myself. Writing about art may be easier than writing about oneself. But my wife, children, friends and a few students somewhat pestered me to write. When I started to work on what I now call my autobiography, I was pleasantly driven into a kind of nostalgic world. I tried to capture my past memories, incidents and happenings. Lo ! and behold, I was overwhelmed by the responses of my own live experience. Slowly, writing became a spontaneous outpouring like painting.

My student Dinanath's autobiography *The Drawing Master of Digapahandi* in Oriya is an excellent piece of writing, which I have always admired. I have also read portions of Asim Basu's autobiography *Kathare-Kathare* as well as singer Akshyay Mohanty's *Aryadasara Atmalipi*. I mention only these for they belong to artists, non-literary

creators. I am no good in Oriya and therefore attempted this in English. I don't know if I have been able to capture the subtle nuances of deeply felt experiences and artistic perceptions. The total grasp of my life story would reveal in a fourfold panorama. I call it panorama, because each has a multi-vision with bearing on the unfoldment of my life. These are the Dehra Dun days, the Shantiniketan, the London and the Khallikote. Doon School has given me the discipline, Shantiniketan, rhythm, colour and creativity, London, a window to the world and finally Khallikote, the convictions of a pursuit. I am greatly indebted to each of them supplicating and integrating into an experience—this autobiography.

The elements of traditional and anti-traditional are woven with the same thread and make it vibrant. Fortunately or unfortunately I was born into a family of aristocrats and modernists. In the family there were and are army surgeons, army Brigadiers, Judges and Chief Justices, doctors, engineers and social workers. When I forced myself to art (it would seem as though), frankly speaking I had no idea in which direction my little life boat would drift. But I had an uncontrollable urge to unfold the beauty of life through art. I had never wanted power and position. They came to me as if in the stride. I was simply mad for the inner vision like a child admiring a load of monsoon clouds or the fresh sunshine on a lonely meadow or the mosaic of colours in the wings of a butterfly. Even today I don't know for what I am upto. My whole life has remained a pursuit—a pursuit for creativity and beauty. I could now very well admire their sensible demand on me to write, otherwise I would not have started at all. Therefore my love goes to them, my

wife Geeta, son Bapi and daughter Kisu as well as to nieces Shyama and Abha. I am equally grateful to ace physicist Padmabhushan Trilochan Pradhan, eminent Oriya writer Mahapatra Nilamani Sahu who could understand the value of such a writing and constantly inspired me into it.

My students Jagdish Chandra Kanungo, Siba Panigrahi and Ramahari Jena deserve my thanks for their interest in my writing.

My thanks are due to Dinanath who took pains to edit my manuscript, structure it and made arrangements for its printing.

December 1, 2002 Ajit Keshary Ray



The Violinist Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*



Horses Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*



loats Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*



The Flight-II Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*

My Family

I was born in December 1922 in Sakhigopal in Puri District. We were a family of five sisters and three brothers, with an arrogant army doctor father and a loving and brave mother. My father was Capt. Kshetra Mohan Ray, mother Srimati Dei. My sisters were Bina, Jyotsna, Pramila, Indira, Prativa and brothers were Sangram and Ranjit. My sisters Bina and Jyotsna were doctors; specially Dr. Jyotsna Dei was a very eminent gynaecologist of India. My brother Brig. Sangram Keshary Ray was the first King's commissioned army officer in Orissa and my younger brother Ranjit Keshary Ray was the first railway engineer, trained in Jamalpur, Bihar and UK.

I first studied in Stewart School, Cuttack, Ravenshaw Collegiate School, Cuttack and then my father, who was a competent surgeon and had worked under British surgeons during the First World War and a great admirer of Englishmen, wanted to give the best education to his children and hence sent me and my younger brother Ranjit to the prestigious Doon School in its inaugural year in 1935.

My Education in Doon Public School

In 1935 my father sent me and my younger brother Ranjit to the Doon School, the first Public School in India in Dehra Dun run on the lines of Eton and Harrow Public Schools in England. The students were from all over the country. They were the sons of Rajas, Maharajas, Nawabs and ICS Officers. I had a predilection for drawing and modelling but in the schools at Cuttack there was no scope for the development of art as there was no art school, gallery or art exhibition and no aesthetic sensibility amongst the people. But in the Doon School it was completely different. We learnt the Western ways and manners of eating, dressing, talking and playing Western games like cricket, tennis, hockey and boxing. There, all the teachers starting from the headmaster to the PT instructor were Englishmen. A few Indian teachers were Oxford and Cambridge graduates. There were different extracurricular activities like painting, modelling, stone carving, carpentry, motor engineering, aircraft engineering, gardening, journalism, debating, dramatics, music, dancing, athletics, wrestling, boxing and gymnastics. For the first time there, I met Sudhir Ranjan Khastagir, a very talented and famous painter and sculptor. I saw in his studio and drawing room, reproductions of paintings of Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore, Asit Haldar, A.R. Chugtai, Kshitindranath

Majumdar and many other famous artists. I was very impressed by their works and immediately resolved to become like one of them. I talked to Khastagir about my interest in painting and sculpture. He was very sympathetic, understanding and friendly and promised to help me. Thereafter I started going to the art class on every Saturday and Sunday. Under his guidance, I learnt the technique of painting and modelling. The Headmaster, A.E. Foot also encouraged me a lot. I won many awards and prizes in painting in the local art exhibitions. There I was also very fond of games, athletics, gymnastics and boxing. I was the athletics and boxing captain of the school for three years.

Our Headmaster, Mr. Foot was a giant of a man, standing over 6 ft, a strict disciplinarian, hard working, efficient but at the same time considerate, warm-hearted and understanding. We had jokingly nicknamed him Bulldog. He would never tolerate any slipshod work. While we would be doing our PT in the morning, he would quietly come up from behind and shout at anyone whom he would find cheating. Khastagir went to England in 1937 and took mine and some other's paintings with him to exhibit there. A column had appeared in *The Statesman* eulogising my painting 'Fishing in the Rain'. My father was very pleased to see it and had preserved a clipping of it for a long time. We, the students and teachers used to congregate in the assembly hall for prayers presided by the Headmaster. The most remarkable thing about the prayer was that we used to sing the present National Anthem "Jana Gana Mana" at that time, 12 years before India's independence. Mr. Foot was a great friend and admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

I had a very happy time there in the school with good food, games, physical exercise, boxing, wrestling, swimming, picnics and plenty of painting and sculpting. Khastagir and I had become very good friends. Khastagir was not only a talented painter and sculptor but also a very good singer with a deep melodious voice. I passed my Senior Cambridge examination in 1938. My brother Sangram was already an officer in the Indian Army, hence, my father wanted me to join the Indian Navy. Soon I appeared in the entrance examination and failed. My two sisters were doctors, so my father wanted that one of his sons should be a doctor. My younger brother Ranjit was very good in science and mathematics and had decided to become an engineer, thus I had to become a doctor. But he did not know that I was a squeamish chicken-hearted person not able to stand the sight of blood. One day he told me that he was going to perform an operation in the hospital the next day and I must come and watch it in order to gain some basic knowledge about surgery. I just could not say no to him. He was a typical army officer and would not stand a no from anyone. So I went to the Operation Theatre. The assistants laid the patient on the table and got him ready. My father washed his hands, put on the gloves, mask and apron and went to the table, but as soon as he picked up the scalpel, I ran away from there, unable to stand the sight. After the operation was over, my father sat down for his tea and when he looked around, he did not notice me. He asked someone about me and was told that I had run away before the operation started. When he came home, he called for me and shouted at me and reprimanded me, stating that a chicken-hearted person like me could never make a

doctor. I meekly replied that I did not want to be a doctor. He became furious and asked me about what I wanted to do in future. I told him that I wanted to become an artist. There upon he said, "you will be a beggar earning only Rs. 50/- a month. Who understands or appreciates art here in Orissa ? There is no art school, art gallery or exhibition and no scope for its development here." I became very depressed and started planning as to how to mould him towards my way of thinking. I knew he was a great admirer of Englishmen and the Headmaster of Doon School was the only person who could convince him in favour of my decision. So I wrote to Mr. Foot explaining to him about my father's objection to my taking up art as a profession and requested him to write to my father and convince him to accept my plan. Mr. Foot wrote to my father requesting him to allow me to take up the profession of my liking and in which I would be happy and thus be able to prosper in future because I was talented and had the making of a great artist.



Sunflower and Kena *Oil on Canvas*

My Training at Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan

Eventually my father was convinced and soon I proceeded to Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan. I took my admission in Kala Bhawan in 1940. I can never forget the reception I got when I first arrived there in Shantiniketan. I arrived there clad in trousers, T-shirt, hat and a big cabin trunk. Some young men started booing me, saying that an Indian Sahib has come to Shantiniketan. I felt very embarrassed and humiliated and the very next day I went to Bolpur and bought two pairs of pyjamas and kurtas and locked up my trousers, shirts and jackets and never brought them out till I left Shantiniketan. I started mixing with the students and made friends with Bengali, Punjabi, Ceylonese, Madrasi, Gujarati, Chinese and Japanese students and also came in close contact with the late Nandalal Bose, Biswaroop Bose, Ramkinkar Baij, Binode Behari Mukherji, Rabindranath Tagore and many other important persons and dignitaries there. The late Satyajit Ray, who later rose to eminence as the world famous film director was then a student of Kala Bhawan. Both of us became great friends. The life at Shantiniketan was completely different from that of the Doon School. Life in Doon

School was very disciplined. We ate western food, wore western clothes, had western habits and laid a heavy stress on the English language. But in Shantiniketan it was just the opposite. There the food and clothes were dal, bhat, dhoti, pyjama, kurta and saris and everyone spoke Bengali, even the Chinese and Japanese.

After living in Shantiniketan for a year or two, I realised the reason for its creation and significance. I understood that Shantiniketan was the very epitome of India's real Vedic culture and Gurudev Rabindranath stood as its symbol. He epitomised all that was best in the Indian culture and tradition. Here I feel it most imperative to cite the diabolic intention of the British rulers who introduced their educational system in India some hundred and fifty years ago. They came to India aimed with the conviction that the Indians were uncivilised, uneducated and ignorant and so they had to be educated and civilised. Lord Macaulay was sent to India to study the situation and recommend a system of education for the Indians. Macaulay came and toured the whole of the country and



Palanquin *Wood engraving*

suggested the establishment of schools, colleges and universities in different states broadly based on the British system with some minor changes here and there. He said, "we will set up such colleges and universities in India that will train young Indians in a way that they will be Indians only in name and complexion but Englishmen in thought, action and habits and with these anglicised Indians, we will rule India." They found out to their cost that sending British officers to India for running their administration was very expensive and a great strain on the British coffers, whereas training and appointing Indian ICS officers would be much cheaper. They would be quite satisfied with half the pay of the British officers. So the real and diabolic intention was to rule India with the help of Indian ICS officers under the pretension of educating and civilising India. Rabindranath Tagore immediately fathomed their intentions and realised that if the onslaught of their movement continued unabated then the whole culture and tradition of India would be wiped out completely in no time. Hence, in order to salvage and protect the country's culture and tradition he established the Visva-Bharati University at Shantiniketan, formulated its syllabus and courses of studies and invited many eminent scholars from all over the world to come and teach in his University. He opened Hindi Bhawan, China Bhawan, Kala Bhawan, Sangeet Bhawan, Sikshya Bhawan, Vidya Bhawan, etc. thereby introducing the system of teaching keeping in view the rich cultural heritage of the country. Rabindranath was not only a great poet, but a great musician and artist.

Nandalal's Student

When I took admission in Kala Bhawan, I went to meet Mastermahasaya Nandalal Bose in his house. When I entered the house and touched the feet of Mastermahasaya, he blessed me by putting his hand on my head. My first impression of him was that of a magnificent personality, a perfect symbol of humanity, sobriety and deep learning. He was very simply attired in white khadi pyjama, kurta and plain Gandhian chappals. He was dark, broad shouldered with short curly hair and moustache. To me he looked like a great Rishi. Later on I came in contact with Kinkarda, Binodeda, Bisuda (Nandalal Bose's son), Perumalda, Masoji, Gouridi and Jamunadi. Da and Di are the short form of dada and didi. The spirit of fraternity prevailed in the Ashram and that is why everyone there was either dada or didi. Each teacher was a doyen, a pioneer in his own field. They were all dedicated artists and most unassuming. That was my first introduction to my eminent gurus. The subjects taught at Kala Bhawan were Indian painting, sculpture, graphic art, batik, alpana design and leather craft. Mastermahasaya did not take any class directly but used to visit most classes frequently and take a keen interest in each student's work, and encourage him. I learnt the technique of painting from Masoji, graphic art, i.e. wood cut and lino

cut from Bisuda, modelling from Kinkarda, outdoor studies from Binodeda and design, alpana and leather craft from Mastermahasaya's daughter Gouridi.

Nandalal Bose stands out as one of the greatest artists of India. His lines, colour schemes and compositions are unique and incomparable. Some of his greatest masterpieces are Uma, Tapasya, Arjuna, Natirpuja and The Birth of Chaitanya. I have seen those paintings and they have left an indelible mark in my mind. When I saw the painting of Arjuna, I stood spellbound in front of it. It is a big painting with a half reclining figure of Arjuna done in Indian red lines and a little green in the background. But my goodness, what powerful and bold lines, in perfect conformity with the description of Arjuna, the third Pandava in the Mahabharat. It is a unique painting, the acquline nose, the big almond shaped eyes the long curly hair, jutting out chin, curling moustache, a typical leonine face with a broad massive chest, powerful neck, big muscular biceps and arms, wrists and fingers like the claws of a lion. It is the perfect depiction of a great, powerful and courageous warrior of the battlefield.

The painting of Uma is a completely different type of picture. It is in dark sombre colours, mostly in blue and grey creating an atmosphere of meditation. It is the picture of Uma in meditation, a beautiful ascetic female face with half closed eyes engrossed in deep meditation, one glance at the painting and you cannot mistake it for anything but a lady in meditation. So much about Nandalal. Now Binode Behari Mukherji was another genius of a

painter. When I first went to meet him, he came to me and started looking at paintings from very close quarters. Upon asking a friend about it, I was informed that he was blind in one eye. But in spite of this drawback he used to take our theory class and our outdoor study class, quite successfully. In the course of his talk in the theory class, he used to quote from eminent art critics and refer to them from the book and even the number of the page in the book, such was his uncanny memory. He used to ask us to study animals, birds and flowers and when we showed him our sketches, he used to point out our defects and ask us to study them again and more carefully. I used to observe him at work in his studio. He used to first apply the flat colours and finish them with direct bold lines. A few years after I passed out from Kala Bhawan in 1945, he became completely blind, and most surprisingly, he kept on painting and produced hundreds and hundreds of paintings, all very bright and bold. The late famous film director Satyajit Ray has made a documentary film on him called *The Inner Eye*, very aptly captioned because when the physical eye was gone, he could see only with the inner eye. Once in 1965 when I was a lecturer of painting in Government Art School in Khallikote, I was invited as an examiner for the Diploma Examination in Painting at Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan. There I went to meet him in his room. When I went and bowed to touch his feet he immediately exclaimed, "who, Ajit Keshary". I was completely flabbergasted, because his wife who was standing near him had not introduced me to him. So that means that after 20 long years he could still remember the feel of my touch.

The late Ram Kinkar Baij, my modelling teacher was an outstanding sculptor. Although he never competed in any art exhibition, all the artists and writers in India, knew him to be one of the greatest sculptors in the country. His sculptures were massive structures in concrete. They were compact and the hands and legs were larger than life size and expressive. He was very hard working, absolutely dedicated and most unassuming. I had seen him working in the summer heat during the day, clad only in shorts, vest and a palm leaf hat. Such was his dedication that he sometimes forgot to have his lunch while working. He was influenced by the sculptures of Rodin, Jacob Epstein and other big monolithic sculptures in stone standing to a height of 40-50ft. He always used to tell us that although the hands and feet in Rodin's sculptures were bigger than life size yet they were very expressive. Although he had received many honours and lots of money, yet he died a pauper in the end. Many of his famous sculptures are now cast into bronze and preserved at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

The late Binayak Masoji, a tall and big Maharashtrian painter, built like a wrestler was our teacher in painting. We learnt to copy the hands and feet, faces and full figures from Rupavali drawings from Ajanta paintings by Nandalal Bose. They are the basis of Indian painting. Masoji was a very considerate and kind hearted person and helped and encouraged us whenever we went to him.

Black and white designs always attracted and fascinated me. A white design against a

black background and vice-versa is very attractive and I learnt the techiniques of lino cut and wood cut under Biswaroop Bose, son of Nandalal Bose. He was a master in wood cut and had learnt the technique in China and Japan and had rendered many famous paintings of Abanindranath and Nandalal into coloured wood cut prints. I did a few coloured wood cuts under him. Gouridi, Nandalal's daughter was our teacher in Oriental design and alpana. She was a very graceful and warm-hearted lady and used to take a keen interest in the work of her students. She was also a very good artist.



Reclining Woman *Wood engraving*

Shantiniketan: Its Moods

There were many festivals observed at Shantiniketan, organised and conducted by Gurudev Rabindranath himself. He composed the music and the dances himself. Those festivals based on the four seasons were Vasanta Utsav, Varsha Mangal, Pahila Vaisakh and Paushmela.

The Vasant Utsav was observed during the time of Dola Purnima of Holi. The girls in yellow saris and blouses and boys in yellow dhotis and kurtas danced in groups on the stage to the accompaniment of songs and sprinkling of abir (red, green and yellow powders), use of coloured liquids was prohibited there, so we used only abir. We applied the abir on the feet of our elders and teachers and they on their part put the abir on our foreheads and blessed us. A sanctified atmosphere prevailed there, which is rare to find nowadays. Everything that was done and said there, exuded an air of Indian culture and tradition. Each of these festivals was observed with dance and music composed by Gurudev himself. Most of the students' hostels were mud huts. The girls' hostel was a pucca building. The museum building, art gallery, lecture halls and classrooms were pucca buildings. There were no cinema halls, big shops or cars in Shantiniketan at that time, i.e. fifty years ago. Important dance dramas composed by

Rabindranath were staged there on the library verandah, Central Hall or Sangeet Bhavan. Some of the most famous ones were Chitrangada, Natipuja, Chandalika, etc. and sometimes during the time of performance, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore used to come and sit in front, near the performance in a special chair, till the very end of the show.

After living in Shantiniketan for a few years, I fell into thinking and comparing my old Doon School days with my life at Shantiniketan. The medium of teaching in Doon School was English and the whole system of training was on the lines of English Public Schools, even the habit of consuming our food with knife and fork, the school uniform of grey shirts, shorts and stockings, hats and suits at dinner time, etc. So we turned out to be a bunch of westernised Indian students. It was a system of western cult to which we had become accustomed. But in Shantiniketan, it was a completely different atmosphere and the system was based on the Indian Vedic concept and culture of plain living and high thinking. The food and clothes were plain and simple. All the inmates spoke Bengali, even the Chinese and Japanese. I somehow feel that my education in these two different institutions has been of immense benefit. I learnt the discipline of the west from Doon School and the spiritual ethos of Shantiniketan.

My Friends in Shantiniketan

In Shantiniketan my friends' circle was limited to a few sincere aspiring artists who in their lives grew to international stature as painters, sculptors and film directors.

The legendary film personality Satyajit Ray was one of my best friends. He was a graduate from St. Xaviers College, Calcutta. We lived for five years in a hostel in Kala Bhawan. He had come to Shantiniketan to study art. His association created in me a taste for Indian classical music. He used to bring long playing records of Abdul Karim Khan, Faiyaz Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Inayat Khan, Ravi Shankar and Yehudi Menuhin, and played them late at night. Switching off the lights, we would listen to music for hours together. I remember him as a very talented artist and an eloquent speaker in English. He was very polished in his manners and most unassuming. At that time, who could ever foresee a change in his career from a painter to a writer and a film maker? But in his later life, he rose to eminence as the greatest film director of his time. His films won for him the Oscar award and the Bharat Ratna. All these glories were showered on him one month before his death at the age of 72. Some of his most famous films are *Pather Panchali,*

Devi, Mahapurush-Kapurush, Charulata, Shatranj Ke Khiladi and *Gopi Gayen Bagha Bayen*. He will be long remembered as one of the greatest film directors of all time. When I think of him and his art, I feel as if a light is entering into me making me elated. I say to myself how fortunate I was to be his friend.

Sankho Choudhury was another close friend of mine. I am indebted to him too for having got me admitted into one of the best art institutions, the 'Anglo-French Art Centre' in London. Jacob Epstein was the first British sculptor who was influenced by the Egyptian sculptures and all his carvings are evidence of that influence. Both Epstein and Henry Moore were inspired by the massive monolithic sculptures of Egypt, that stand upto a height of 50 to 60 ft.

The special feature of Henry Moore's sculptures is that, although they are big and massive they have many holes and empty spaces in them, and they are designed in such a manner that each hole forms a part of the whole composition.

Sankho Choudhury was a very talented sculptor. Soon after passing out from Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan he went to UK, other European countries and USA. After completing his course in sculpturing he returned to India, to be appointed as the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda. He was one of Ram Kinkar's best students. His concrete sculptures and stone carvings were solid, compact and bold in technique and composition. Later on, he became the Chairman of the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi and won the fellowship from there.

The Revivalist Art Movement

Here I feel it is imperative to say a few words about the Revivalist Movement in Indian Art in Bengal. Before I came to Shantiniketan, I was very prejudiced against the British. I used to think that most of them were obsessed with the colonial mentality to exploit India to fill their coffers. But after sometime I learnt to my surprise that there were some very human and generous minded Englishmen who had the acumen and insight to recognise the merit, significance and worth of Indian culture and tradition. One such person was Mr. E.B. Havell, a very erudite, talented and broad-minded Britisher who came as the Principal of the Government School of Art and Crafts in Calcutta, some time during the beginning of the 20th century. He first went round the whole country, saw the sculptures of Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark temples, the sculptures in Mahabalipuram and Meenakshi temples in the south, the Ajanta Cave paintings, Rajput and Mughal paintings and observed that, here was a country which had a very rich and excellent tradition in Art, that far excelled their own and which was nearly two thousand years old. He met Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Asit Haldar and made them realise that India had an excellent, rich and long

tradition in painting and sculpture that needed to be revitalised. He advised them to study the Indian art traditions and the importance of artistic expressions, write books and articles on them and teach Indian art techniques to the students. E.B. Havell himself wrote a few books on Indian sculptures and paintings, removed the Greek and European paintings and sculptures from the Calcutta Museum and Art galleries and replaced them by sculptures from Bhubaneswar, Puri, Konark, Mahabalipuram and Meenakshi temples, Rajput, Mughal paintings and reproductions of Ajanta Caves. But he incurred the wrath of the British rulers. They had sent him to promote and advocate the teachings of western art, but instead he eulogised and praised Indian Art which the rulers could not tolerate. So soon he was called back to England. He along with Abanindranath, Nandalal and Asit Haldar are regarded as the pioneers of the revivalist movement in Indian Art in Bengal. They not only revived but revitalised Indian Art with new techniques, colour combinations, compositions and ideas. Thus a new chapter or rejuvenation of Indian Art started with these eminent artists of Bengal.

Now before I end this chapter on Shantiniketan, I want to say a few words about the significance of Shantiniketan itself. Rabindranath, Abanindranath, Nandalal, Ramkinkar and Binode Mukherjee are all gone but the ideals and spirit with which Rabindranath, Abanindranath, Nandalal and others had started Shantiniketan, still persists and Shantiniketan today vividly stands as the true symbol of the synthesis of Indian Vedic culture and tradition.

The five years that I spent in Shantiniketan were perhaps the most profitable and happiest period of my life spent with my teachers and friends. I learnt all that I could about tempera, frescoes and wash painting, modelling, wood cut, and lino cut and won my diploma with distinction in 1945.



Harvest Time *Oil on Canvas*

First Job as an Art Teacher in Bikaner

Soon after finishing my training at Shantiniketan, I wrote to Sudhir Khastagir, my first Art teacher in Doon School to find a job for me. He informed me that Mr. R.L. Mehta, my English teacher in Doon School, was going to Sadul Public School, in Bikaner, Rajasthan as its Principal and an Art teacher's post was vacant there. I took no time to write to Mr. Mehta and he invited me to join them immediately. I prepared myself and after two weeks I arrived in Bikaner to start my service career as an art teacher. That was the month of July 1945. But somehow the sight of the place filled me with depression. The place was very hot, being situated in the heart of the Thar desert with only 12 inches of annual rainfall. The sight of sand, camels and nothing else was in glaring contrast to the lush green meadows, trees, flowers, mountains, birds and rivers of the place I hailed from. So naturally I could not stand the sight of a dry desert, and my heart started pining to see those lush green fields, rivers and country boats. When I met Mr. Mehta he was very pleased to see me and allotted me a free quarter and appointed me as the Superintendent of the Hostel. The pay was Rs. 165/- with free accommodation and food. The

following day I began taking the drawing, painting and modelling classes of the students. The boys were tall and well-built like the typical Rajputs. Most of them used to come on horses and a few in cars. They were only interested in joining the army and were very crude and unpolished in any academic course. One day the Principal entered the dining hall suddenly and what he saw there did not appeal to him. Some of the boys were standing on the chairs and even on the tables and were shouting at the servants to serve the food. He shouted at them to behave themselves and they sat down. Afterwards Mr. Mehta asked me jokingly, "well Ray do you think that these boys will ever be civilised?" I said, "I doubt it Sir". As most of the boys belonged to the royal families and hence they were very arrogant and took pride in misbehaving with the teachers. Taking up the uphill task, Mr. Mehta set them right within two months. He introduced the card system just like in the Doon School. A yellow card for misbehaviour and telling lies and a red card for not doing homework, or failing in the class examinations. If a boy got a yellow card he could not go home on Sundays, could not buy anything from the School tuckshop and could not go to the School swimming pool or watch any School entertainment programmes. And if a boy got a red card then he would have to do his homework in the detention class under the supervision of a teacher while others would be playing games. This was the system of punishment in Public Schools in England and introduced in Public Schools here. Mr. Mehta was very kind and considerate towards me, and my colleagues were also all very friendly but the

place was extremely hot, the atmosphere too arid for my liking and so I decided to quit in December 1945. When I submitted my resignation to Mr. Mehta, he was very sad and told me that he had very high hopes in me and expected me to help him run the school, because I had the experience of a Public School training, but I was at liberty to resign if I did not like the place. Finally I resigned and came home in December 1945.

On my return to Puri, I found Niranjan Mishra, an artist friend of mine living with my eldest sister Dr. Bina Dei. He had left his art teacher's job at Cuttack and came to live with my sister. He assured me that the feudal rulers of the states would buy our pictures and finance us to set up a studio in Puri. But after a few days I came to realise that all those big promises about selling our paintings and setting up a studio were all false and a hoax. We went and met one or two fedual rulers of the states with our paintings. They only wanted their own portraits in oil colour done by us. When they learnt that we did not do portraits, they lost all interest in us. So we came back completely disillusioned and disheartened. I then realised that the atmosphere in Orissa was not favourable for the development of art, at that time. There were no art schools or art galleries and the educated people looked down upon artists as only drawing masters and nurtured the opinion that only unintelligent people, who proved to be failures in academic studies, took to painting, music and dancing. The prevailing atmosphere was negative with an utter lack of sensibility for art and aesthetics. The educated people and the

government were callous. Therefore one could not think of an art shop, or gallery or the general development of art.



Whirlpool *Wood cut*

Commercial Artist in Calcutta and My Marriage

I got fed up with such an inactive and indolent life and asked Niranjan to get out of Puri and seek his fortune outside Orissa. So he went to Kanpur and got a job for himself as a designer in a leather factory there, and I left for Calcutta within a few days. I contacted a few Shantiniketan friends there and got myself a job as a commercial artist in the Sales and Promotion Company of Birla Brothers in Dalhousie Square.

While I was in Calcutta my marriage was arranged by my mother and sister Dr. Bina Dei, and even the date of my marriage was settled without my knowledge. When my mother wrote to me about this, I got furious and replied that I could not marry a girl whom I had not seen nor known anything about. So my mother got very perturbed and sent my brother-in-law Purna Mohanty to Calcutta to explain things to me and persuade me to accept this proposal. He came to Caltutta and told me that he himself had seen the girl I was to marry and that she had everything that an artist wanted. She was very good looking, very fair, healthy, intelligent and came from a very cultured family. I attached a lot of credibility to his great pomp and show. I got married to Geeta, on July 9, 1947 at Puri.

Her name was actually Kiran but my mother gave her the name "Geeta" from the 'Bhagavad Gita'.

During the first week of August 1947, I came to Puri on leave to spend a few days with my family. But a few days after I came, I suddenly saw the headlines on the front page of a newspaper and what I saw just horrified and stunned me. A ghastly and terrible Muslim and Hindu riot had broken out in Calcutta just a day before the declaration of Independence. Both Hindus and Muslims were butchered mercilessly like animals and not a single street in Calcutta was spared. The annoyed police were called in and after three days, the situation was brought under control and normalcy returned to Calcutta after seven days. After a few days of this incident I went and joined my job there. An uncanny atmosphere of fear and an apprehension of a recurrence of the riot prevailed for a few days, in the minds of the people.

On the August 15, 1947 the Independence of India, was declared by the then Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten. But it was a handicapped India, with a portion cut from it to form West Pakistan and another portion as East Pakistan.

West Pakistan comprised Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and North East frontier province and the whole of East Bengal as East Pakistan. Mahatma Gandhi never wanted to divide India and when he learnt about this, he became very unhappy and resigned from the Congress.

To London for Agricultural Studies

My two elder sisters Dr. Bina Dei and Dr. Jyostna Dei who were doctors went to UK for higher studies and my younger brother Ranjit, who was a Railway Engineer, also went there for further training. My eldest brother Sangram, who was the first Oriya Army officer, had been to England in 1930 for his military training. Hence, naturally I nurtured a desire to go to UK for higher studies in fine arts. I wrote to my sisters expressing my desire to go there and requested them to finance me. They wrote back stating that they were ready to help me but on condition that I study Agriculture and not Art. I gave my consent hoping that after reaching UK I would persuade them to accept my plan, that is of studying art. They arranged my admission in an Agricultural college, my stay in an Indian hostel and sent me the passage money. I arranged my passport and ticket for my voyage and went to Jabalpur to my brother Sangram. He drove me to Bombay in his car, put me on board the ship and bade me goodbye. So in March 1949 I set sail for UK with a heavy heart for leaving India and home behind for a long time, but also happy at the prospect of seeing a new land and my younger brother and my eldest sisters. Our ship stopped for a few hours near Port Said in Cairo, Egypt. I along

with two Oriyas and a Bihari doctor hired a taxi and went on a short tour around Cairo and came back after two hours. I found the Egyptian men and women very handsome, fair and well-built. We did not buy anything there except a few packets of dates. There were many big shops and hotels, all beautifully decorated and displaying all sorts of ready-made garments but very expensive. After a few days we reached the Tilfury dock in England. It was evening and my sister had come to receive me at the Port. I collected my luggage, boarded the train with my sister and got down at the Victoria Terminus in London. It was a very big station, perhaps four times as big as Howrah Station. But one thing that struck me straight on the face was the perfect discipline amongst the people and a complete absence of noise in the station. They automatically queued up in front of banks, bus stands and booking counters. They are perhaps one of the most disciplined races in the world and that is the reason why they were able to rule over us for more than two hundred years.

From Victoria Station, my sister and I hired a taxi and proceeded to my Indian Hostel in London. It was a big Hostel, owned by an Indian from South America. All the residents there were Indians. There were Oriya doctors, Bengalis and Biharis, Punjabis and Gujaratis and so on and the food was Indian with South Indian dosa and idli, etc. The atmosphere was typically Indian. The Oriya and Bengali doctors used to get up late, brush their teeth, put on their trousers over their night dress and go to their breakfast table. They very rarely stirred out of their rooms or mixed with the English people. I felt as if I was living in India and not in England and very soon I got disgusted

with leading such a slovenly life in this hostel and wanted to get out of here as soon as possible. I realised that one had to mix and live with the inhabitants of a country, in order to understand that country.

After living for a few days in the hostel, I thought it expedient to meet the Principal of the agricultural college in Cirencester. I got the address from my sister and wrote to the Principal seeking an appointment with him. He wrote back informing me of a date and also assured me that he would send someone to receive me at the Railway Station. Accordingly I went to Cirencester on the appointed date and was met by one of the college students at the station. He drove me to the college in his car and introduced me to the Principal. I spent the entire day with him. I was privileged to have breakfast, lunch and tea with him and talked to him about my study in the college. He was very kind and considerate and promised to help me in every way. I told him that I would come and join the College when it reopened after one and a half months. I came back to my hostel the same evening. In the hostel sitting alone and isolated I was getting bored. I ventured to go out and started visiting the British Museum and famous art galleries like the Tate Art Gallery, the Wallace collections. The British Museum was a very big museum and it took me several days to go round all the galleries. For the first time in my life I could see original Rajput and Mughal miniatures. I also saw silver filigree works like snuff boxes used by the kings, princes of England, Persian carpets, and Kashmiri shawls. When I visited the Tate Art Gallery and the Wallace collections, of all the paintings and

sculptures, what really fascinated and impressed me were the modern paintings and sculptures of the late 19th century and early 20th century. I saw the original paintings of Cezanne, Paul Gauguin, Monet, Manet, Picasso, Degas, Pissarro, Braque and Vincent van Gogh. They were the pioneers of Impressionism, Syntheticism, Cubism and Expressionism. I was most impressed by Picasso's cubistic paintings and Van Gogh's Expressionism. I had never seen before the use of such bold lines and colours in painting. The theme and compositions were bold and exiciting. Each and every brush stroke in Van Gogh's paintings exuded the vigour and dynamism of life. I could update my memory as Picasso was inspired by the Negro and Egyptian sculptures and how he rendered the nature in cubical forms. Picasso changed the entire usual perception not only of his time but for times to come. I considered myself fortunate to see Picasso in the original. I felt as if I was standing like a pigmy before a towering artist.



Bridge *Wood engraving*

Studies at the Anglo-French Art Centre, London

One day I was going round looking at the paintings when I suddenly heard a very familiar voice from behind calling me by my name. I turned around and was taken by surprise because I found Sankho Choudhury, popularly known as "Sankhoda" in Shantiniketan. He was about four or five years senior to me and was very fond of me. He asked me as to what I was doing here in London. I told him that my sisters wanted me to study agriculture and they were financing me on that condition. He just laughed and asked me, "Do they grow rice or sugar cane or tropical crops here in England ?" He said, that the soil and climatic conditions of England were different from that of India. He reminded me of my special aptitude in art. I listened to him with rapt attention. To instil confidence in me he questioned me, "Do you remember your science and can you recapitulate it after ten years ?" I replied, "No, not at all". I agreed with him fully and requested him to plead my case in front of my sisters and convince them. The next day he approached my sisters, convinced them of my potential as a very talented artist and appealed to them for financial assistance on my behalf and take an advanced course in Fine Arts there. He himself was working in the Anglo-French

Art Centre, a famous art school in London and would help me get admitted there. My sisters were convinced and allowed me to study stone carving, etching and engraving. He introduced me to the Principal Mr. Roger Green, sculptor Sean Crampton and etcher and wood engraver John Buckland Wright. They were all very considerate, broad-minded and generous towards me. Sankhoda also arranged a good hostel for me called "Oxford House" in Bethell Green, London. The residents there were all English, French and German men and women. They were all scholarly people, doctors and professors. I got an easy access to the hostel, because Mr. Hallam Tennyson (grandson of Lord Tennyson) was a member of the Managing Body of the Hostel and a great friend of Sankhoda. Hallam Tennyson had lived in Shantiniketan for several years, learnt Bengali and did his doctorate in Rabindra literature. His wife also had learnt Bengali and lived in Shantiniketan, for four years. Thus, both husband and wife were well acquainted with the Indian culture, tradition and Indian art. Thus any Indian who went to England, found in them helpful and great friends. I also learnt from them that the Oxford House was so named because it was started by some Oxford University professors and students with the objective of educating and improving the living conditions of the slum dwellers there. There were many big rooms, where some of the inmates of the hostel used to take sewing and knitting classes, cooking, modelling and painting classes once or twice. In fact I too had taken these classes. There was also a small gymnasium and boxing ring where teenagers

used to come and practise gymnastics and boxing. All the inmates of the Oxford House were very friendly, helpful and affectionate, and whenever it was bright and sunny, the boys and girls and even older men and women would get out of their houses and run to the seashore, parks or some beautiful picnic spot to enjoy themselves and celebrate their ecstasy. Most of the time the weather was dull and gloomy and when Londoners saw a little sunshine, they just went mad with joy. The English people by nature are very neat, clean and disciplined and keep their streets, roads and parks meticulous. At the side of every road, street and park there were litter boxes with clear instructions to drop the litter in them.

I started my art training, i.e. modelling, stone carving and graphic art at the Anglo-French Art Centre under the instruction and guidance of Mr. Crampton and Buckland Wright. I brought the stone carving tools such as pitcher, heavy points, medium points, claw tools and chisels and wood engraving tools like bull dozer, spit sticker, graver, fine spit sticker and pitchers. Besides Sankhoda, there were two more Indian students, myself and John Murray, an Anglo-Indian from Lucknow. I started by studying from models in the modelling class, where there were English, French and Negro men and women models. They had tall and beautifully proportioned bodies. There was one tall Negro boxer, who had broad shoulders on him, and muscular chest, arms and legs. I did three stone carvings. Mr. Crampton later told me to do the carvings of Indian subjects, because he expected some sculptures from me with Indian

characteristics. I did a stone carving of an Indian farmer in a mixed style of Indian and Egyptian sculpture with big hands and feet and Mr. Crampton appreciated it greatly. During my stay here I frequently and specifically on Sundays used to go and visit my sister Bina Dei and have lunch with her in the Indian students hostel near the Indian High Commissioner's office. My other sister Jyostna Dei had passed her MRCOG examination by then and had



Mother & Child ***Bronze-1951***

left for India, a month after I reached England. My younger brother Ranjit had also finished his Engineering course and left for India before I reached UK. He had decided to marry an English girl and had left the address of his fiance with my sister and had requested my sister and I to meet her often. Audrey, that is Ranjit's then fiance and future wife, used to come and see us in the Indian students hostel on Sundays and have lunch and tea with us before leaving in the evening. She was tall, well built, good looking and quite affectionate. Sometimes she and I used to go out, have lunch in an Indian restaurant and watch a film, after which I used to see her off at the station.

V.K. Krishna Menon was then Indian High Commissioner in England and we Indians used to go to the High Commissioner's office on special occasions like India's Independence Day and Republic Day. We had the occasion to listen to talks by important dignitaries like Radhakrishnan, Pandit Nehru and others. It used to be very pleasant and happy get-togethers, people met their old friends and made new ones; I used to feel very much at home when I met them and talked to them. We were so many miles away from home and yet so near. Once my brother Brig. Ray, was there at one of these get togethers as he was a member of the MRA (Moral Re-Armament) founded by Dr. Frank Bookman, an American. It was a spiritual organisation that believed in quiet meditation and world fraternity and that the whole world was a big family, children one father and mother. I attended some of their meetings in London and one major seminar in Switzerland with my

brother. People from most of the countries in the world were there. Raj Mohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and son of Devadas Gandhi was a very active member there. He was an Oxford graduate with an MA in Journalism and was a brilliant speaker. Lord Sinha's daughter and grandson were also there. They had settled down in England. Dr. Frank Bookman was there at that time and one morning my brother took me and introduced me to Dr. Bookman and when he learnt that I was educated in Shantiniketan, he started talking to me about Rabindranath and how he had met him and talked to him and his discussion with him about poetry and literature and described him as a great poet and spiritualist. Then he talked about Gandhiji, his non-violence and his faith in the Divine and stated that his grandson Rajmohan Gandhi was an important member of the MRA. I found Dr. Bookman, very knowledgeable, straightforward, human and a great spiritualist.



Valley *Woodcut*

A Visit to Switzerland, Germany and Other Countries

I lived in Switzerland for a few days in the company of two English members of the MRA. We used to rise early in the morning, brush our teeth, finish other rituals and sit down to a quiet meditation for 15 to 20 minutes and write down our thoughts in our quiet time in notebooks. Later on we shared out thoughts with each other. Thus, I had a very pleasant and happy time with the MRA members, going out on picnics and sight-seeing. Switzerland is a beautiful country with some peaked mountains, green meadows and bright flowers everywhere and even the men, women and children are all dressed in bright colourful clothes. Some people claim that it is as beautiful as Kashmir. After fifteen days I bade goodbye to Dr. Bookman and my MRA friends and returned to England to resume my studies in the Art School.

Sometimes I used to travel to other countries of Europe during my holidays with one or two artist friends and go round seeing the contemporary paintings and sculptures in French, German and Italian Art galleries. Very often I saw young artists busy painting or sketching in parks, on roadsides, in open fields. They had done away with all the technical norms and limitations pertaining to painting and

sculpture and started experimenting with all sorts of unorthodox materials like sawdust, nails, iron filings, matchsticks, broken glasses, paper cuttings from newspaper and magazines to evolve a new aesthetic vocabulary or language of their own to express their particular ideas and conceptions. The academicians insisted on correct anatomical drawing, light and shade, realistic colours in nature and perspectives, etc. But the younger generation of artists revolted against the imposition of such rules by them. By that time the system of transport and communication had improved and many of the younger European artists had come to Japan, China, India, Egypt and Africa and had seen the paintings and sculptures there, and had been convinced that beautiful paintings and sculpture could be done without showing anatomical details, realised that art was creation and not an imitation or copy of nature and man. They had the talent and intelligence to invent an original language to adequately express their particular ideas or experiences. That was the time Europe was passing through several modern phases of experiments in the field of art. The artists were getting enriched with influence from several far, near and from Middle Eastern countries. Their exposure to Egyption art, 10 to 12 centuries old introduced a strong feeling for solidity and massiveness. This led to a real conception in sculpture and awareness for material content.

I once saw a big outdoor exhibition of sculptures. Many famous sculptors had participated in it. There were stone carvings by Epstein and Henry Moore, bronze and wood carvings by others. Henry Moore's carvings were most outstanding and interesting. The

reclining women sculptures looked like mountains with caves and holes in them. His sculptures maintained the characteristic of the material used. Jacob Epstein was the first British sculptor who was influenced by the Egyptian sculptures and all his carvings are evidence of that influence. Both Epstein and Henry Moore were inspired by the massive monolithic sculptures of Egypt, that stand upto a height of 50 to 60 ft. The special feature about Henry Moore's sculptures is that although they are big and massive, they have many holes and empty spaces in them and they are designed in such a manner that each hole forms a part of the whole composition.



Women with pitchers *Wood cut*

Henry Moore in Our School

Henry Moore, the world famous English sculptor once came to our school. I was in the studio when he went round to see the works of students. His eyes fell on a piece of stone that I was carving. He immediately exclaimed, "perhaps an Indian student is doing this ?" Crampton, my teacher introduced me to him and he started talking to me about the essence of Indian sculptures, the temple sculptures of Orissa and South India. He was full of praise for the Indian sculptors who even two thousand years ago had a clear understanding of form and material. He spoke of his admiration for Egyptian sculptures. He stated that ten thousand years ago the Egyptians had realised the language of stone, its solidity and massiveness.

A Visit to Scotland

One day two of my Oriya doctor friends and I decided to go to Scotland. There in Scotland was one Oriya doctor doing a higher course in surgery. We had written to him before and he came to receive us at the station. We stayed with him for two days and the landlady of the house where he lived proved to be very kind

and affectionate. She used to prepare our breakfast and lunch herself and sit at the table with us and coax us to eat all the food and not leave anything behind, because she had cooked it all for us. She used to bring us our tea and cigarettes in the evening.

After breakfast, we used to go out sight-seeing. Scotland is a beautiful place with picturesque landscapes, and the Scotsmen in their typical kilts, berets and bagpipes looked magnificent. We saw one open air exhibition of stone, wood and bronze sculptures by eminent English and European sculptors. They were all very bold and interesting compositions. After this we went to Dublin, the capital of Ireland, spent a day there in a hotel and returned to London. We found the Scotsmen and Irishmen more social, amicable and friendly than the Englishmen. The English by nature are somewhat reserved. While the English subdue or tone down their 'R's the Scots and Irish pronounce it with great force.



Boats *Wood engraving*

With Different People in London

One day I went to one of the cheap hotels in London to have lunch. At such hotels you pay at the counter, serve yourself, pick up your food and find yourself a table to sit down. I had just sat down at a table when an Englishman came and sat down in front of me and started talking to me in very fluent Hindi. I was surprised and asked him how he could speak such good Hindi. He told me that he was in India for forty years and worked there as a manager in the Scindia Steam Navigation Company and had ten servants to attend on him in Calcutta. He asked me if I was a Bengali, I told him I was an Oriya and he said he knew Orissa and Cuttack. He said he was very unhappy in London because he was being given a raw deal. He lamented that he had to do everything by himself, since he had no servants and had only a clerical job to support him. He had to stand in queues in front of every counter, shops and banks. On another occasion, I went to a South Indian Hotel in Regent Street, London called 'Veeraswamy' with an Indian friend to have an Indian lunch. There I found more Englishmen than Indians. All of them were India-returned Englishmen, and having got used to the hot and spicy curries, rice, dal and

chappatis of India, found the English food stale and bland. So they thronged Indian hotels for hot and spicy Indian food, but only occasionally.

Hallam Tennyson, grandson of Lord Tennyson was a great friend of Sankhoda. Through Sankhoda's acquaintance, I also became his good friend. One day he invited us to celebrate Dussehra in his house. I went to his house straight from my art school and was surprised to see him, his wife and Sankhoda all in Indian clothes. Hallam in dhoti and kurta, his wife in a sari, Sankhoda in pyajama and kurta. I had not anticipated this, obviously I was in European dress and felt very embarrassed. I offered an explanation to Hallam that I came straight from the school and I did not get time to switch over to my Indian clothes. He understood my embarassment and said it was quite all right and did not mind. When I entered his room, I felt as if it belonged to an Indian gentleman, because all the furniture was Indian, with Orissan tie and dye door curtains and bed covers, Manipuri shoulder bags and even a Manipuri handloom which his wife used for weaving. There were no chairs but divans and low stools and shelves full of Rabindranath's books in Bengali and English. We were served with delicious Indian lunch and were entertained with melodious Rabindra Sangeet. Both of them were very good singers. This was the most memorable Dussehra of my life.

One day my sister and I went to see the 'Kew Gardens'. There they had grown all sorts of tropical trees like Banyan, Banana, Coconut and Mango trees inside huge glass houses and maintained them at tropical temperatures.

One Dr. Christopher Penton who lived nearby, used to come to Oxford House quite frequently and became a great friend of mine. He was not only a doctor but a good dancer and singer. We used to sit down in the drawing room in front of the hearth and talk for hours together about Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and spiritualism. I found him quite resourceful because he knew a lot of things about India, its culture, religion, art and tradition. One day he asked me if I could make chappatis and I said yes. He just wanted to test me and my knowledge about Indian dishes. So he invited me to lunch to his house the next day. He himself was in the kitchen and made chappatis and an Indian curry. We sat for lunch where I enjoyed his cooking and specially the curry dish. I asked him, from where he learnt Indian cooking so well. He told me he was in Punjab, during the Second World War and learnt making chappatis, curry and dal. Once he bought me a ticket to watch the tennis finals of Wimbledon. I saw the match between Pancho Gonzales and Ted Schouder. Gonzales was from Spain and Schouder was from USA. Ted Schouder won the match and the championship. Pancho Gonzales was as dark as an Indian, just like the Italians, Portuguese and Southern Frenchmen because these countries lie in the Mediterranean region and the sunny climate there is like the Indian climate. My stay in London was busy and I used to enjoy and entertain myself during my spare time. I could not realise how two long years elapsed since I left India. I started feeling homesick and longed to return home and see my near and dear ones. My younger brother's fiancee Aundrey had already left for India to get

married to Ranjit. They had a registration marriage at Bombay and then a Hindu marriage according to Hindu customs at Cuttack. My uncle the late Justice B.K. Ray, then Chief Justice of Orissa High Court organised the marriage where the then Orissa Governor the late Dr. Asaf Ali was invited to the marriage ceremony.



Reclining Nude *Oil on Canvas*

Back to India

I completed my two-year course in modelling, stone carving, wood engraving and etching. Got my certificates from the Principal of the Anglo French Art Centre, bade him goodbye and also bade goodbye to my friends in Oxford House and set sail for India in March 1951. I still retain a happy memory of my days in England. My friends in England, were all very helpful, friendly and affectionate. A sudden thought comes to my mind that this world is in a state of flux, all the time changing, changing its environment and features and never leaving any record of its changes anywhere. It is upto the artists to record those changes with their brush, canvas, chisel, hammer and stone. I fell into philosophising on life when I was alone in my deck chair on the deck of the ship.On the ship, in the lounge, I used to enjoy a glass of beer or on the deck the moolit night. The moonlight glistening like silver on the waves and stretching out for hundreds and hundreds of miles was a marvellous sight never to be forgotten. I also enjoyed the sight of numerous white sea gulls swooping down with tremendous speed like jet planes, the flying fish jumping thirty forty feet at a time and occasionally a dolphin would raise its head above the water before going down again. Whenever the ship neared a port, hundreds and hundreds of small

boats full of merchandise, small articles, boxes of dates, chocolates, dry fruits and ladies, gent's and children's garments and chappals would row closer. The boatmen would put the articles in a net tied to a piece of rope and fling the rope to the customers to draw it up who in turn put the money in the net and threw it down to the boat. It was the most convenient yet primitive way of doing business on sea. I only bought a few packets of dates and chocolates. They were quite cheap. Then time passed very quickly with me drinking beer in the lounge, reading magazines and newspapers in the library or gossiping on the deck with Bengali or Bihari friends. Most of them were either doctors or barristers. The ship in which I was returning to India was quite a big one and I reached Bombay in fourteen days from London instead of seventeen days, that I took previously to reach London in 1949.

It is more than half a century since I left UK and I don't know what has happened to my friends there, because after coming back I could not maintain contact with them. Perhaps most of them might have either died or grown very old. I had struck up a friendship with a Bengali gentleman on the ship and when we arrived at Bombay in the evening he took me to a Bengali hotel, known to him. It was a small hotel, that did not look very clean or respectable. However they served us rice, dal, fish curry and rassogola. We slept the night there and the next day I caught the train to Cuttack. I had already written home about my homecoming and so when I got down at the Cuttack railway station I was received by my wife, nieces, nephews and friends. I was very happy to see them all after a

long interval of two years. It was a very happy and endearing reunion. Reaching home I learnt about my mother's illness and she was bedridden, suffering from cancer in her foot. This filled me with grief. The joys of homecoming receded. She was writhing in acute pain, but endured it all silently without uttering a word. I have yet to see a woman standing upto such a situation with so much courage and endurance.



Return from the market *Wood engraving*

In the Village Niali

We had some 100 acres of landed property in our village Niali and as there was no one to look after it and as we did not get any profit out of it, my mother had decided to dispose of it. My eldest brother objected to it and suggested that I manage the property. I realised how foolishly they had become attached to wealth and property, even, though they did not get or have any chance of gaining any profit out of it. Still I did not want to hurt their feelings and considering my mother's condition, I accepted the responsibility and got prepared to go to my village soon.

Once my uncle the late Justice B.K. Ray, then the Chief Justice of Orissa, arrived at our house to see my mother on her sick bed. He told my mother that since the goverment had decided to abolish the Zamindari system very soon, it would be wise on her part to divide the landed property at Niali amongst her three sons and Bina Dei, the eldest unmarried daughter. My mother instantly accepted my uncle's advice. The Sub-registrar was called to our house, the deed was drawn up under the guidance of my Uncle and was registered. After two days my wife and I arrived in our village. The manager was there to receive us. But the sight of the house and the surrounding place was in such a shabby state that I was thoroughly apalled. How

could anyone live in such an uninhabitable house where the surroundings had veritably become a jungle with overgrowth of shrubs and infested with cobras and monitors? The house itself was in a hopeless state with no walls but half a dozen wooden pillars and a thatched roof and a small dark room that served as the manager's office with a hole as the window and a doorway with no doors. So the first thing I did was to clear up the place of all the overgrowth of shrubs and wild grass and get rid of the dangerous snakes and monitors and repaired the house as much as I could to make it somewhat habitable and give it a respectable look. I put up a wall in the middle of the big room, fixed a door and a couple of windows to convert it into a sort of a living room. My next job was to contact William Nayak, a friend of my brother Sangram. He was an Engineer in charge of Government tractors and gave them on hire basis to plough our lands. I paid half the amount in advance and promised to pay the rest after the completion of the work. That year, I ploughed about 30 acres of land and got a good crop of paddy. The same year, in February my mother died. She was a very loving and god fearing woman too. I had lost my father in 1942 while I was at Shantiniketan, and with the death of my mother, the emotional bond with the house got loosened.

In 1953, the year my son, Bapi (Jaivir) was born, I sold half the paddy and some land and built a mud house, quite big and strong with big windows and doors and the rooms fairly spacious. Next year the Zamindari system was abolished and we lost all the income from the Zamindari. The government took away the revenue and the market place that was in my

wife's name. The government said that the former proprietor had no right to sell or gift away the market which was of public interest. Finally we were left with only some 50 acres of land. Most of it was low lying and waterlogged. The sharecroppers or the farmers who cultivated our land on share basis were very dishonest and exploited us outright. One year it was floods and next year it was drought. So we got practically nothing out of the land. We struggled through considerable financial and physical hardships. Some times during the rainy season, both of us used to fall seriously ill, laid down with malaria and had to come to Cuttack for treatment. After a month or so, we used to get cured and get back to Niali.

I found some broken stone pillar undergound when the ground was dug up for laying the plinth of the new mud house. It was a mud house, because I did not then have enough money to build a pucca house. I had taken my stone carving and modelling tools with me and immediately I picked up a few good sized stones and made the layout, i.e. the sketches for carving them. They were all sand stones and so responded to carving. I carved a pair of doves, a mother and child, two sitting women and the head of an old man with a flowing beard. I drew a few coloured sketches of women working in the paddy field. The mental satisfaction I derived from the carvings gave me scope to refurbish my experience gained in England. This was momentary in the village and I constantly felt depressed because I could get none to understand or appreciate my creations. An artist creates just for the joy of creating, an unalloyed celestial joy which cannot be derived out of any

delicious dinner. The joy derived out of creating something new, acts as a perennial source of inspiration and joy for the artist. But he wants his joy to be shared, recognised and appreciated by others.

However this depression and frustration due to leading an inactive life was to some extent mitigated by my friendship with Mohapatra Nilamani Sahu. He later rose to eminence as an Oriya short story writer and novelist and also bagged the central Sahitya Akademi award. He was then studying in the final year in the Ravenshaw College when I went to live in Naili, i.e. in 1952. He became a very intimate friend of ours and we used to spend a lot ot time together, going out on picnics, to village fairs and sight seeing. We used to sit together till late at night and discuss subjects of mutual interest like literature, music, poetry and art. He agreed with me that Orissa at that time did not have the requisite atmosphere or scope for the development of art. People had not developed the necessary aesthetic awareness or consciousness for recognising and appreciating art in Orissa although we had started basking in our past glory by shouting from the roof top, that we have an excellent tradition in painting and sculpture which is incomparable. Now both of us have retired from government services, he as a professor in BJB College, Bhubaneswar and I as the Principal of the Government Art College, Khallikote, Ganjam. He lives in Sahid Nagar in Bhubaneswar and I in Cuttack but our friendship has sustained us all through these years. Both of us have become devotees of Sri Maa and Sri

Aurobindo and very often meet each other in the Pondicherry Ashram and the Matru Bhavan at Cuttack.

Now while at Niali, I was brooding and seriously thinking about how to get out of this mess and doldrums and get myself a job as an artist, there appeared like the manna in the desert, a news item in the Oriya newspaper about the establishment of a Government School of Art Crafts in Khallikote, Ganjam. It was just god-sent and like a blessing in disguise for me. I immediately applied for the post of a lecturer in painting. Lingaraj Panigrahi, former Chief Justice and then Minister of Education sent word through my brother Sangram to meet him in his office on an appointed date. Whem I met him in the office, he told me that he had examined my certificate and was convinced that I was the most qualified amongst all the applicants, and asked me to go and join the Art School as soon as possible.



Hill Scape *Wood Cut*

My days in Khallikote Art School

Within 15 days, I went to Khallikote and joined as lecturer in painting in the Government School of Art and Craft. Sarat Chandra Debo, a cousin of Rajabahadur of Khallikote was the Principal and Bipra Charan Mohanty was the lecturer in sculpture and modelling and Rabi Narayan Nayak was the instructor. They had joined the school just a few days before me. The Principal S.C. Debo was a perfect gentleman, very polished and polite. He entertained us with tea and biscuits and showed us our quarters comprising two big rooms, bathroom and a kitchen. It was a big palace, but old regalia had its trees in the environment. The electrification of the building was done nearly after one year . B.C. Mohanty had been trained in the Calcutta School of Art in an academic syle of sculpting. In fact, Rabi Narayan Nayak was from Shantiniketan.

I was allotted a big room for my painting class and I started my class in right earnest with some nine to ten students. The students were from various districts of Orissa and some of them were really talented. We had interviewed them and selected thirty students for the first year. I assigned them the copying of hands, feet, face and full figures from Nandalal Bose's

Rupavali, the drawings from Ajanta frescoes which serves as the basis for Indian painting. They were all line drawings and one copies them in order to improve one's skill in drawing. I used to take the students out to the neighbouring villages and Chilka Lake and make them study the birds, animals, men and women working or rowing the boats for catching fish. I impressed on them that outdoor studies was essential for improving their drawing and ideas for compositions, and colour schemes. I also advised them to experiment with different colour schemes and drawings and evolve an original pictorial language of their own to express their ideas and experience because art was creation and not an imitation of nature. Each and every painting or sculpture of theirs must carry the stamp of their originality in it and then only they would get recognition as artists. I used to do coloured sketches in the class along with the students and one day the Principal, Sarat Chandra Debo came into my class and seeing my sketches, exclaimed that since my sketches were very bold, I should try my hand at oil painting. I told him that I did not know the technique. He confided to me that it was very easy. As I was using water colour as a medium, I could very well use oil colour with a brush or a spatula. I wasted no time in procuring some oil colours, brushes and spatulas from the local shop and did some sketches in oil directly with a spatula. I preferred a spatula to a brush because, I could lay it down thick on the cavas like a mason plastering a wall.

Beginning of Modernism

Sarat Chandra Debo was a great devotee of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh. He used to conduct evening satsangs in the school. Later he became a great exponent of the Divine Life Movement in Orissa. I was living on the second floor and the boy's hostel was on the ground floor just below my window. Once I was looking down the windows and saw several sparrows whirling round and round in spiral formation like jet planes. I was fascinated by the sight and immediately made a few sketches of it. Then I made some coloured sketches of it, arranging the birds in a cubic composition. My students saw the sketches, they were very impressed and suggested that I make a painting of it. My wife also appreciated it greatly and said it was a unique composition and I must paint it and send it to the state exhibition. In 1960 the Lalit Kala Akademi, Sahitya Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi were established in Bhubaneswar. Sarat Chandra Debo as Principal of the Art School was the ex-officio member and I was also appointed as a member by the government. Gouri Kumar Brahma, the eminent orator and scholar was the secretary of all the three academies. H.K. Mahatab, then the Chief Minister of Orissa was the President. The Lalit

Kala Akademi decided that the state level Fine Art exhibition would be held in December 1962. There will be sections for oil paintings, water colour paintings, commercial art and sculpture. I suggested to the Chairman and the members that there should be a section for modern art as well in order to encourage young artists, who were creating new types of paintings and sculptures. Senior artists like Gopal Kanango and Bipin Choudhury and a few others objected to it, arguing that no one understands modern art. I put the counter argument that, it was this very reason why we should have a modern art section separate from others. We should advance and march forward not backward, that is the essence of human evolution. If those who did not understand art would come to us and ask us as to why we had painted red, yellow and blue men and women and used such fantastic and unrealistic colours and forms then we would explain that God had endowed us with intelligence and the ability to create new things and evolve a new language to express our new ideas. If we accept modern poetry, dance and music, then we must accept modern paintings and sculptures. After long deliberations my proposal was accepted and we had a separate Modern Art section in the State Art exhibition. Then I got a canvas ready by our craft instructor H.K. Behera, and started the composition for my picture *The Flight* based on the sketches of sparrows that I had done previously. They were flying and whirling round and round in circular motion and I wanted that circular motion to be the central theme of my painting. I reduced the whole thing to its simple and basic form and

interpreted it in cubic style. I substituted big triangles for squares, rectangles and half circles for the courtyard below. The colours were brown, blue, grey, yellow–ochre and white and no red, all sober colours and laid the colours thick in tempera style with a spatula and palette knife. I sent this painting to the first Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition at Bhubaneswar in 1961. The judges were from Calcutta and Shantiniketan and I won the first prize in modern art, and Ananta Panda was awarded the second prize. Ananta Panda was the son of Basanta Panda, a well-known artist from Balasore. Ananta Panda had won his Diploma in Fine Arts from Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan and joined the Art School as lecturer in oil painting in 1961. Anant Panda was a dynamic personality, a committed teacher, a gifted singer and orator. We became great friends and together we started experimenting with different styles and techniques in painting and sculpture. We inspired and encouraged the students. There were many talented young artists amongst the students. They were Purna Pradhan, Ramesh Mohanty, Braja Mishra, Siba Panigrahi, Dinanath Pathy, Akshaya Das, Padmanav Behera, Nursingha Das, Jagadish Kanungo, Jyotirmoyi Mohanty, Basanta Kumari Samanta, G. Bhaskar Swamy and many others. Most of them later won awards from the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi. But now I find that most of them have given up painting and sculpturing and are unable to participate in National Exhibitions. They might have become disillusioned with the modern trends in painting and sculpture, which appear too revolutionary and fantastic for their taste.

Among them, Dinanath proved to be successful as a modern painter. Even as a student at Khallikote, he sent his oil painting done in cubic overtones, *Harvesting Songs* to the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta which won him an award. At that time in Khallikote it was a new experiment. I was pleased that a student of mine got an award and my influence as a painter worked on him. Those were the days of modernism developing roots in Orissa, and the School of Art and Crafts at Khallikote played a pivotal role in bringing in this resurgence. It set the stone rolling and the teachers who were responsible besides me were Sarat Chandra Debo and Ananta Panda.

During this time my son Bapi (Jaivir) and daughter Kisu (Jayashree) had attained the age for going to school and as there was no good school at Khallikote, my wife Geeta took them to Cuttack, got Jaivir admitted in the Stewart School and Jayashree in the Convent School and left them in the care of my sisters, Dr. Bina Dei and Dr. Jyotsna Dei. In 1962, I sent two oil paintings "Shattered Sun" and "After the Luncheon Party" to the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition. The "Shattered Sun" won the award for best exhibit and the "After the Luncheon Party", the first prize for oil painting. This encouraged me and I felt my experiments in modern painting were getting recognised by colleages and students and felt proud of my achievements. The "Shattered Sun" was a kind of collage with oil colour as the binding medium. I had applied coloured sand to create the required texture. At that time texturisation was a new technique. The "Luncheon Party" was

painted in the simple shades of ash grey, greenish grey, off-white and black. Next year I sent one painting "Violinist" to the Calcutta Fine Art Academy exhibition and another painting "Equestrian Forms" to the Central Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition at Delhi. Both of them were done in typical cubistic style and I won the President's award from Calcutta for the "Violinist" and the "Equestrian Forms" was accepted for display in the Central Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition.



Card Players *Wood Cut*

Study Tour to South and West India

In 1961, the government made a financial sanction for a study tour outside Orissa. So I along with H.K. Behera took some twenty students to Hyderabad, Ajanta, Bombay, Calcutta and back to Khallikote. My wife Geeta and my son Jaivir, who was on holiday accompanied me on this study tour. Hyderabad is famous for its Salarjung Museum and biriyani, which is so famous that it is exported to Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other gulf countries. Salarjung Museum has one of the finest collections of European and colonial Indian art. The museum is also famous for its decorative art objects. Salarjung Museum is so named after the name of Salarjung, the bachelor Prime Minister of the Nizam of Hyderabad. He was a very learned person and a great lover of art, poetry and music. He spent most of his time visiting different countries of the world and collecting most valuable artifacts, Italian and Greek marble statues, Japanese paintings, woodcut prints and embroideries, Chinese paintings, wood carvings, bamboo carvings, Rajput and Mughal paintings, South Indian stone carvings, silver filigree works of Orissa and daggers, swords and armours of dead kings and rulers whose handles were inlaid with jades, pearl, rubies and diamonds. There were more

than 70 rooms and each room contained rare pieces worth several crores of rupees. There was one wood carving of a soldier in front and the back was a woman in veil, and another white marble carving of a woman in veil and the most interesting feature about it was that the veil was carved in such a manner that the sharp features of the lady were faintly visible. Then there was a Japanese embroidered piece depicting a stream running down a hill, the water cascading over the boulders was so realistically depicted that I mistook it for a painting and realised my mistake when I went near and examined it from close quarters. It took us nearly four hours to cover all the rooms. After that we went to a nearby hotel and had the Hyderabadi biriyani. After lunch we went on a sight seeing tour, saw the famous Charminar, did some minor sketching and came back and slept the night at a hotel and the next morning we started for Bombay.

After reaching Bombay, we went straight to the Sir J.J. School of Art and Architecture and there we met Jatin Das of Baripada, now a big name in Delhi. At that time he was studying in the second year. He was kind enough to take us round the classrooms, and later on he took us to the Bombay film studio. There we met Sadhu Meher of Sambalpur, who was then struggling to become an actor. Now he is a great actor in the Hindi films and has already won a best actor award. We saw there on the roadsides, heaps of sponge chappals and T-shirts selling quite cheap. We all bought the chappals and some of the boys bought a few T-Shirts too. Then we slept the night in a hotel and the next day we started for the Ajanta and Ellora Caves.

We boarded the train at Bombay and got down at Aurangabad after a few hours and left for the Ajanta village by bus. We had some snacks near the caves and started to climb the steps on the hills to see the frescoes. When we arrived at the top and saw the paintings on the walls of the caves, we were just flabbergasted. I had never seen such magnificent paintings before in my life. I just could not imagine that they were painted some two thousand years ago by Buddhist monks. The princely face of Buddha with half closed lotus petal eyes, a sraight sharp nose, full lips, delicate and tapering fingers, broad shoulders and narrow waist and also the faces of Sujata and Rahul in front of Lord Buddha were very beautifully depicted. Many of the paintings suffered from the ravages of time and were damaged, but those that had escaped the onslaught of time attract the tourist and even the foreign tourists all the time. My eight-year-old son Jaivir got so excited that he started jumping and running up and down the caves.

On the advice of E.B. Havell, then the Principal of the Government School of Art and Crafts, Calcutta, Nandalal Bose, Asit Halder and a few more eminent artists of Bengal went to Ajanta to study and copy the cave frescoes and wrote books and articles eulogising the frescoes. Nandalal Bose brought out a series of brush line drawings of the cave paintings in several volumes called "Rupavali drawings". They were beautiful line drawings and served as the very basis of our Indian painting studies. He not only salvaged Indian painting from the state of stagnation and neglect into which it had fallen but revitalised it with his bold lines, original

composition and colour schemes. After seeing the cave paintings, we returned to Bombay in the evening. Then we spent the night in Bombay and the next day we boarded the train for Calcutta. After reaching Calcutta, we booked a hotel, left our luggage there and after breakfast we went to see the museum, the zoo gardens, Victoria Memorial and the Government Art School. Calcutta at that time was not so over crowded or dirty as it is now. We met some Oriya students in the Art School who took us round the class rooms, introduce us to the lecturers and the principal and we watched the students at work. Then we returned, had our lunch and afterwards some of the students went and bought some colours, papers and canvas. After spending the night in the hotel we proceeded to Khallikote the next day.

The excursion was a good break from the monotonous routine work and had a good refreshing effect on the students. The art classes started regularly as per schedule. In 1961, Lokanath Satpathy joined the Art School as lecturer in Commercial Art. In the third year the majority of the students used to take up commercial art as their special subject as it was in demand in the commercial market. Every year there was the state Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition and the students used to submit their paintings, sculptures and many of them won prizes.

During this time I used to do many oil paintings, and send them to the National Exhibition in Calcutta and New Delhi. Sometimes they were selected and sometimes,

rejected, but I was impervious to it. I painted because I derived joy out of creating something new. Some of my friends observed that they noticed a streak of Picasso's cubism in my paintings. I frankly admitted that it was so and I was really influenced by Picasso's cubism. Because, when I saw some of Picasso's original paintings in London and Paris, I was completely overwhelmed by them. The lines, colours and compositions in spite of the distorted human and animal forms were so bold, vigorous and dynamic and the composition so unique that they have left an indelible impact on my mind. As hard as I might try, I am not able to break away from its influence and it just creeps into my paintings quite inadvertently. Here I feel impelled to quote Dr. A.S. Raman, the eminent art critic on Picasso. He writes, "If we understand Picasso we understand modernism in its totality, because his art is the signature of the 20th century. Picasso was more than a legend in his lifetime. He was almost a myth. His success story has no parallels in art history. He was no doubt an enigma". His output is so prodigious that his paintings, sculptures, ceramics, graphic arts, tapestries, collages and paintings taken together come to nearly 1,00,000 pieces. He is 20 artists rolled into one who has successfully tried his hand, at every department of art. Dr. Raman says, "The power of Picasso's art lay in its vitality, innocence, spontaneity and unpredictability. His sources were many, in fact too many including child art. The final product of his efforts and experiments of course were, his own. From realism to surrealism, his work covered a wide range of styles, techniques,

methods, influences and disciplines. Once he created the head of a goat with the help of the seat and the handle bar of a bicycle."

The world belongs to those who have got the capacity to grow. The power of growth is so tremendous and dynamic that like a river in spate, it sweeps every obstacle, obstruction and surges ahead. That is the essence of human evolution. We must advance, progress and march forward not recede backward. We must all the time keep on experimenting with new techniques, lines and compositions to evolve a new aesthetic vocabulary of our own, to express our original ideas, emotions and experiences. Vincent van Gogh, a Dutch born painter who had no formal training in art is the best example of such a dedicated artist, who unfortunately could not get any recognition during his lifetime. When Pablo Picasso became a legend and a myth during his lifetime, van Gogh was hooted out as a mad man and not allowed to exhibit his paintings in any art gallery or salon. He was an indefatigable worker, working 18 hours a day and created some 10,000 paintings in 10 years and at last committed suicide out of frustration by shooting himself at the age of 37. He was so obsessed with the urge to paint that he worked like a mad man subsisting on black coffee for hours together. But when his younger brother's wife collected all his works, rented a big hall, hung up his works and invited all the dignitaries, princes, nobles, counts and governors to witness the exhibition, they were just stunned at the sight of such an astounding collection of paintings. They had never witnessed before such powerful lines, colours

and compositions in their lives. Each and every line exuded the dynamism and vitality of life. Van Gogh never painted the portraits of nobles or princes. He detested them, saying that their life was a dissipated and vulgar life. Life is that which struggles and fights against adversity.



Yaksha and Megha *Wood Cut*

I Became Principal

Sarat Chandra Debo, the Principal of the Art School retired in Decmber 1966 and I took over the charge as Principal. But to my cost, I soon found out that the Principal's post was no bed of roses. I was soon confronted with so many problems. Finding solution, to them became a formidable task for me. The most pressing problem at that time was the building itself. It was an old palace in a dilapidated condition, and so could not fulfil the requirements of an Art School. There were no hostels for students, so the storerooms and a big motor garage were improvised as hostels, but there were no bathrooms or toilets for the boys. During the rainy season the roof leaked like a sieve in every room, so that it became impossible for us to conduct classes in them. The bureaucratic machinery moved contrary to one's demands or plans that got bogged down somewhere in the middle of its course. The PWD. Executive Engineers, SDO's, contractors came, discussed the matter, gave suggestions and there the matter ended. The answer was that funds were not available. So in this labyrinth of complicated problems, I could hardly make time for any creative pursuits. Very often the students staged strikes, demanding bathrooms, latrines or repair of the buildings,

Financial sanctions came in trickles and some petty repairs were made and the walls were whitewashed. Still in spite of these drawbacks, I could make time to do a few paintings and send them to national exhibitions in Calcutta and New Delhi. The students too kept on painting and sculpturing and sent their works to exhibitions in Calcuta and Delhi.

During my tenure as Principal of the Art School some of the most eminent artists of the country visited our art school. The first visitor was Bhabesh Sanyal, then the Vice President of the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. He came to Bhubaneswar as an invited guest on official duty and being an artist, I wanted him to visit our Art School. He went round the classes, talked to the students, appreciated their works and advised them to work hard and participate in National exhibitions. Then he had lunch with us, after a little rest and tea left for Bhubaneswar en route to Delhi. Our next visitor was Chintamoni Kar, then the Principal of the Government College of Art and Crafts, Calcutta. I had seen an exhibitions of his sculptures in London along with Sankhoda in 1951. I met him the next time in 1958, when he had come as an expert for my interview for the Principal's post in the Art School, Orissa. When he saw me, he smiled and said he had seen me before. He selected me as the Principal. This time he came as the invited guest of the Government to furnish his opinion on the Art School. He too visited the classrooms, saw the works of the students and the teachers, had his lunch with me and left in the evening for Bhubaneswar. He gave a favourable report to the government. The last visitor was Sankho Choudhury (Sankhoda), who was a member of

the general council, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. He too had come on government duty, went round the Art School, met the teachers and students, had lunch with me, told my wife how he saved me from my sisters who intended to make me an agriculturist, and reinstated me as an artist. We had a good laugh over it. He was a great friend of my family, because when he became the Chairman of the Central Lalit Kala Akademi, he came to our house at Cuttack from Bhubaneswar, had tea with us and we talked about our good old days in England.

Sometimes I sit down quietly in the evening and start ruminating over the past and fall into thinking as to why and how an artist paints or sculpts. Then I realise that, when he sees the sun rising like a ball of fire from the sea on the Puri sea beach and the fishermen rushing into the sea with their canoes, he is overwhelmed with joy and an intense desire is kindled in his heart to create either a painting or a sculpture to express that joy. Perhaps that is how the prehistoric cavemen discovered painting and sculpture as the first language to express their joy and ecstasy. Somehow time elapsed quietly without much change, and the students getting a little prompt when the state exhibition came near and the dates for submission of paintings and sculptures were announced in the local papers.

I had a number of talented colleagues like Bipra Charan Mohanty, Rabinarayan Nayak, Ananta Pada and Somanath Mohapatra who was a reputed traditional stone carver from Puri and he was the younger brother of the famous Sridhar Mohapatra, an extremely proficient

stone carver working in the Lucknow Art School. Somanath and I had become great friends and established a special rapport between us as my wife and Somanath both belonged to Puri. They (he and his wife) were both very kind, sociable and hospitable and very often we used to go to their house and vice versa.

Bipra Charan Mohanty had a private bronze casting studio in his official quarters and he used to do a lot of commissioned works like the life-sized statues and busts of Gopabandhu, Gandhi and other political leaders. He had learnt this from the Calcutta School of Arts. His statues are to be found everywhere in Orissa. Ananta Panda later left the Khallilote school to join the DPI office at Bhubaneswar as the special officer in Art Education to look after art activities in schools.



Composition *Oil on Canvas*

Touch of Pondicherry

In January 1973 my wife Geeta went to Sri Aurobindo's Pondicherry Ashram. She was a devotee of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and she and my niece Rita went for the Mother's darshan. Both of them had the Mother's darshan, got her blessings, met other eminent sadhakas like Sri Ram Krishna Das, known as Babaji Maharaj, the late Madhav Pandit, late Prapati, Champaklal, Pranab da, Nalini da and a few others, stayed in the Ashram for nearly fifteen days and returned to Khallikote with Sri Aurobindo and Mother's books on "The Mother", "Prayers and Meditations by the Mother", "Savitri" by Sri Aurobindo and many Oriya books on yoga and meditation and Babaji Maharaj's advice to start Sri Aurobindo's "Pathachakra" study circle in the Art School. So she started the "Pathachakra" at my residence with about 10 students and myself. No teacher joined it. But it had a very salutary effect on the whole atmosphere of the school. Students became more sober and did not resort to strikes or boycotting the classes. During special occasions like Sri Aurobindo's birthday on August 15 or the Mother's birthday we invited renowned sadhakas like Sri Purna Mohapatra, Madhusudan Mishra, Devendra Satpathy, Prapati, Chitaranjan

Das, Chandra Sekhar Rath, Champaklal and Babaji Maharaj and others. Sri Trinath Samantray, the local MLA turned out to be a very sincere and dedicated devotee of the Mother, and by his own ceaseless effort and influence, the Sri Aurobindo Integral School and his Relic Centre were established. After my retirement he carried on the work with such vigour and enthusiasm that several Pathachakras were opened up during a few years throughout the Ganjam district. He has described himself as a competent organiser. In the beginning, I was not very interested in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy or Yogic discipline, but after reading his books on "Integral Yoga", "Synthesis of Yoga" and "Human Cycles", etc. my whole outlook on yoga changed and I realised that this was the only yoga that can prepare and transform you for the ultimate realisation and attainment of the Divine. You do not have to renounce the world and become an ascetic or sanyasi to attain the Divine. All work that you do is the Divine's work and not yours, you are the instrument only, you have to have the proper mental make up for it. I heard learned speeches by Dr. Madhusudan Reddy, Dr. Nadkarni and Dr. Anand Reddy who enlightened me on Sri Aurobindo's yoga and philosophy, and the significance of his appearance on this earth. Here I do not like to go into details of how I got initiated into Sri Aurobindo's yoga. It will be just a waste of time, but suffice to say that my son, daughter, wife and nieces and sisters are great devotees of Sri Aurobindo and Sri Maa. In 1976, my son Jaivir passed his B.E. (Chemical Engineering) with first class honours from the Regional

Engineering College, Rourkela and his M.Tech, from IIT Kharagpur in 1978. In May 1978 he decided to forego a scholarship for pursuing Ph.D. in the USA and instead joined the Steel Authority of India (SAIL) at Rourkela Steel Plant as he wanted to be as near as possible to us. My daughter Jayashree passed her M.A. in history in the first division in 1979 and the same year in November she got married to Kalyan Patnaik, a young, handsone, uprising advocate and nephew of Binode Mohapatra, I.G. Police and also nephew of Ranajit Mohanty, barrister. In February 1981 my son Jaivir got married to Manashi, daughter of Ambuja Ballav Pradhan, Deputy Secretary (Labour). All of them are well established now as engineers, advocates and lecturers in Women's Colleges. In 1976 Bichitrananda Paikray joined as a teacher in the C.T. School, Khallikote. He was a competent teacher, a great devotee of Sri Maa and Sri Aurobindo and a good writer too. He had started a "Pathachakra" in Aska High School from where he was transferred to Khallikote. When he learnt that there was a Pathachakra here, he immediately came and joined us. After he joined us, he enlivened the Pathachakra with his enlightening speeches and explanations on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's yoga, and its significance on this earth. Some twenty students from C.T. School also came and joined our Pathachakra. The Pathachakra movement spread all over the Ganjam District and now there are more then five hundred Pathachakras in Ganjam alone.

Bidding Farewell to Khallikote

In 1978, the Director of Culture, D.N. Padhi, took a very keen interest in the Art School, wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Berhampur University for its affiliation, paid the required fees and appointed me, Asit Mukherjee, Binode Routray and Prof. Kanchan Chakraberti of Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan to prepare the syllabus for the Art College and after the application, the degree course was introduced and the Art School was raised to the status of a college. In December 1980 I retired as the Principal of the Art College and handed over the charge to L.N. Satpathy, senior most lecturer of the College. During the morning the formalities of handing over and taking over the charges were conducted and in the evening there was the farewell meeting with the usual speeches by the lecturers and students, followed by a feast organised by the staff and students. They also presented me with a citation which was quite moving.

I felt liberated from the shackles of administration. But the apprehension of leading an inactive life made me distressed. But this seeming boredom lasted only a few months. I got plenty of time to meet friends and writing articles on art. There were lots of happenings at Bhubaneswar, where artists from Calcutta,

Shantiniketan, Delhi, Bombay and Madras converged. These led to interactions and friendship. I could come to know of Jyoti Bhatt, a reputed graphic artist from Baroda, Ajit Chakraborty, an eminent sculptor from Shantiniketan, Suresh Choudhury from Bhopal so on and so forth. There was Dr. Dinanath Pathy and other lecturers from B.K.College of Art at Bhubaneswar and we had a good time exchanging views in the campus of the Art College; dining together and recalling our Khallikote days.

In 1983 I was invited to attend an artists' camp at Trichur, Kerala. My wife and I went there, stayed for 12 days and had a very pleasant time. We lived in the Municipal Guest House, had lunch in the neighbouring hotel. I did two paintings during the camp. There were artists from Bombay, Delhi, Kerala, Madras, Hyderabad, Kashmir and Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan and Karnataka. We lived like one family together. One painting, "A Marriage Party in Orissa" has been published by the Delhi Lalit Kala Akademi in 1995. Four of my paintings are now preserved in the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademy art gallery and two are in Central Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.

In 1984, I was appointed as the Vice-President of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi. This was not to my taste, but I accepted it reluctantly at the request of my friends and students. That same year I won a case against a mischievous person who had forcibly occupied my 16 acres of land for 23 years at our ancestral village in Niali. I got the order of the decree from the High Court, on the same day Sri Ranjit

Mohanty, bar-at-law and uncle of my son-in-law fought the case for me, and the court gave us the occupation of the land in March 1986. I started the Sri Aurobindo Pathachakra there at Niali. Madhusudan Mishra, a great devotee of the Mother inaugurated the Pathachakra in our house. In 1985, my first granddaughter Avipsa was born to my daughter Jayashree. She was a very fair and lovely child. Now she has grown up to be a very beautiful, intelligent and affectionate girl. She is now studying in the 12th standard and doing very well too.

In January 1987 my second grand daughter Divyasha was born to my daughter-in-law Manashi and son Jaivir. A couple of months later, Jaivir left for the Soviet Union to undergo six months of advanced training in iron making technology in Ukraine.

My granddaughter Divyasha is very smart in academics and represented India in Germany as a child scientist in April 2001 where she spent two weeks visiting the renowned Research Centres and Laboratories of Europe. She is currently studying in Class XI and intends to pursue a career in science and technology. She has an interest in painting too and has done a few intersting ones in oil pastels and water colours with great maturity.



Frolic time *Wood engraving*

President of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi

In 1994, I was appointed as the President of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi. The Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre which had its first office in Shantiniketan had shifted over to Calcutta. In September, R.K. Panda, Secretary, Cultural Affairs, J.C.Kanungo, Secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi, Orissa and I attended the first meeting there, presided over by the Governor of West Bengal. In 1991, a second daughter was born to my daughter Jayashree. She was named Sthitapragyan. She is lovely, fair and intelligent. After my retirement I received numerous ovations and honours from various artists' organisations and associations such as Sarala Award Committee, Bhubaneswar, Utkal Pathak Sansad, Cuttack, Sahitya Sansad, Bhubaneswar, Governor's Plaque of Honour, Swarajya, Kala Bibhushan title from Working Artist's Association, Bhubaneswar. Previously during my service period I was honoured by the Prajatantra Prachar Samiti, Ganjam Kala Parishad, Ganjam District Drawing Masters' Association, Utkal Charukala Parishad, Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi and B.K. College of Art and Crafts, Bhubaneswar. When Sankho Choudhury was the Chairman of the Central Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, I visited New Delhi several times, and he too always sought me out

whenever he came to Orissa. My student Dinanath was appointed Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi in 1994. He wrote me a letter in 1996 informing me of my selection as a national jury member. This was a rare occasion for me and I went to Delhi as the guest of the Akademi with my wife.

There I was introduced to Sri Nandhan, a renowned sculptor from Madras, Paul Kohli of Bombay, and Dhruv Mistri from Ahmedabad, all reputed artists. We picked up nearly 360 works (paintings, sculptures and graphic prints) out of 4000 works and selected 10 for National Awards and another 12 for honourable mention. We finished the work in 3 days, i.e. January 5, 6 and 7, 1996 and I came back to Cuttack on January 9. I was happy that two Oriya artists, Siba Panigrahi and Anjan Kumar Sahu could qualify for the honourable mention award.

I would like to mention some eminent contemporary Oriya artists. Prafulla Mohanti took his degree in Architecture from Bombay's, J.J. School of Art & Architecture, won a National scholarship and went to UK for higher studies. There he did an advanced course and was appointed as a Town Planner for greater London, but later changed his mind and took up painting as a whole time job. He is now settled in London for the last 35 years, travelled throughout the world, exhibited his paintings in Europe, UK, America, Japan, China and India. He is now an internationally famous artist. He has written several books on art and has made a TV documentary of his books. I have seen his paintings at Bhubaneswar and Cuttack. His source of inspiration is the *'Chita and Alpana'*,

a work of Orissa. He has given a new dimension and colour to the *Alpana* motifs. The second famous artist is Jatin Das, also from J.J. School of Art, Bombay. He was in Bombay for some time, but is now permanently settled in New Delhi. He too has travelled widely and exhibited his works in all the major cities of Europe, UK, America, India and Japan. Now amongst the present generation of contemporary artists mention may be made of the following.

After graduating from the Government School of Art and Crafts, Khallikote, Dinanath Pathy did his Masters in History from Utkal University. He joined the Orissa State Museum as Curator of Art and Crafts and during his tenure there he did extensive field research in areas of tribal, folk and classical art of Orissa. He wrote two theses one on the Traditional Paintings of Orissa, and the other on the Art and Regional Traditions and has been awarded two PhD degrees from Utkal and Visva Bharati Universities respectively. Dinanath Pathy has travelled widely, exhibited his paintings and lectured on Indian art in major universities and institutions of the world. From a humble drawing master in the Central School, he rose to occupy the position of Secretary at the National Academy of Arts, New Delhi and became a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow. He has authored more than forty books on art and literature.

Siba Panigrahi rose to become a popular artist in Orissa, consistently exhibiting in state and national exhibitions. He taught at the B.K. College of Art and Crafts, Bhubaneswar as a lecturer in painting. Similarly Jagdish Chandra Kanungo was the Secretary of the State Lalit

Kala Akademi and was responsible for execution of several programmes like the children's art exhibition, *Jhoti* and *Chita* competition and a number of artists camps.

Kasinath Jena is also quite well-known. All along he has been a practising artist. He participated in state and national level exhibitions. Two of my important students are Chandra Sekhar Rao and D.N. Rao. Chandra Sekhar has his own style of painting. He has successfully combined the revivalistic elements of the Shantiniketan School and the modern motifs. D.N. Rao rose to become the Principal of the Khallikote College of Art and Crafts. He experimented quite a lot with the Saura motifs. Along with painting, D.N. Rao also does serigraphy. Both of them are very active in the field of art.

Ramahari Jena is another young and talented painter and print maker. He graduated from the Khallikote Government College of Art and Crafts and has undergone a special training course in graphic art at Calcutta. For his painting "Armenia" he received the first National Award as an Oriya artist. He has been responsible for the development of graphic art in Orissa. He is the Studio Incharge at the Regional Art Centre of the Central Lalit Kala Akademi, Bhubaneswar.

Some Oriya artists of the older generation who are long since dead, but because of their achievements their names have gone down the annals of Art history as eminent painters and sculptors. They were Bimbadhar Varma, Gopal Kanungo, Bipin Bihari Choudhury,

Upendra Maharathi, Sridhar Mohapatra and Gourang Som, Bimbadhar Varma was born in 1903 in Kusupur village in Cuttack district. He studied upto the 8th or 9th Class, and left school as he was more interested in painting and modelling. Due to financial difficulties, he could not study art in Calcutta, Madras or Bombay. He did not have any formal training in Fine Arts from any Art School, but his inborn talent enabled him to learn the basic techniques of painting and modelling privately from some Bengali artists in Calcutta. He settled down in Cuttack and started practising his art there. But no one was interested in art in Orissa and he was barely able to sustain himself by doing cover designs for books and magazines and occasionally a portrait or two of Rajas and big Zamindars. He had done a bust of Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das and a few other Congress leaders. He was greatly influenced by the old Bengal school of painting. His drawings and colours were quite pleasing. He mostly painted rural subjects like village brides, cows returning home, moon and the shadow, sunset, etc. He died a pauper at the age of 51. He did not have enough money for his medical treatment or even to pay his house rent.

Gopal Charan Kanungo was one of the most prominent artists of Orissa. He was born in Nentigarh village, Dist. Puri in 1904, in an ancient family. He was more fortunate than the late Bimbadhar Varma, because he completed his graduation from Ravenshaw College and took admission and completed his fine art training from Government School of Art and Crafts, Calcutta. He not only mastered the technique of

oil painting and water colour painting but was also a good writer and author of several books in Oriya and English. He was a doyen in his field of creation. He earned a great reputation as a successful art teacher, writer and critic. He had a thoroughly dedicated life to the pursuance of painting and was a great source of inspiration to the younger generation of artists and always advised them to work hard to uphold the glorious art tradition or Orissa. He had made a major contribution to the establishment of the Lalit Kala Akademi in Orissa, and was mainly responsible in creating an aesthetic consciousness amongst the people of Orissa. When he died in March 1971, he was the Vice President of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi. His contribution to the development of awareness for art in Orissa can never be forgotten.

Another very famous and eminent artist of Orissa was the late Upendra Maharathi. He was born in Banapur village in Puri district and was a few years younger than Gopal Kanungo. He too passed his diploma examination in Fine Art from Calcutta Government School of Art and Crafts with distinction. After graduating from there, he settled down in Laheria Sarai, Bihar as a commercial artist and book illustrator in the Pustak Bhandar Press. His water colour paintings were really remarkable, specially his Buddha series. He had finally become a Buddhist. He had become very famous in Bihar and UP and was popularly known as "Maharathiji" My sister Jyotsna Dei was a doctor in Darbhanga, Bihar and during my holidays when I was studying in Shantiniketan I used to go and stay with my sister. There I used

to go to Maharathiji and he used to love me like his younger brother. I got very impressed and fascinated by his paintings. The Bihar Government honoured him by nominating him to the upper house in the Bihar Legislative Assembly. He was also instrumental in establishing the College of Art and Crafts in Patna and finally he retired as the Director of the Textile Design Centre, Patna. He was a great follower of Gandhiji, and a strict vegetarian. He was a very great friend of our family. He had married a school teacher in UP and his daughter had become a great Sanskrit and Hindi scholar, did a course in Ceramics in Japan and finally married and settled down in UP. Although he did not live in Orissa and though his activities were confined only to Bihar and UP yet he will be remembered as an illustrious son of Orissa.

The late Bipin Choudhury was born into an affluent family. His father was the late Rai-Bahadur Gagan Behari Choudhury. He was born deaf and dumb but rose to unimaginable heights in spite of his physical handicap. He completed the Fine Arts course in Calcutta, studied further at the J.J. School of Art and Architecture, Bombay and got a national scholarship and took admission in Royal College of Arts, London. He was perhaps one of the half a dozen ARCAs in India and the only one in Orissa. His studies of human and animal forms in pastel, ink and crayon were excellent, done in typical academic style. He did not have any creative work to his credit and will be remembered as one of the most qualified artists of Orissa with an ARCA, London.

The late Sridhar Mahapatra, a very talented stone carver was born in Raghurajpur, Puri District in a family of traditional stone carvers who had left the stamp of their family skill on the temple walls of Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark. His talent was first recognised by the late Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of Dr. Rabindranath Tagore and guru or teacher of Nandalal Bose. He was the founder of the Bengal School of Painting and took Sridhar Mahapatra as stone carving instructor to teach in his school. There he earned a great reputation for his unparalleled skill and talent in stone and wood carving. A few years later he went to Lucknow and worked there in the Art College as a lecturer in stone carving. His works have been exhibited not only in Delhi, Lucknow, Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, but in England, America and Europe, and acclaimed as one of the finest sculptors in classical art or Oriental art. One of his sons is now working as a lecturer in Lucknow College of Art and Crafts. He had settled down in Lucknow and breathed his last there a few years ago. He will always be remembered for his most delicately and exquisitely carved pieces in stone and wood.

The late Gouranga Som was two years junior to me in Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan. He was a very talented artist and mastered the technique of drawing and tempera painting to perfection. He passed his Diploma examination with distinction in painting. After graduating, he got a job as art teacher in the Birla Public School, Pilani in Rajasthan. He was commissioned to do a lo· ›f work for the Birla

brothers and did the complete decoration of Birla Planetarium in Calcutta. That is one of his best masterpieces and most of his works are now preserved in all the prestigious art galleries in India. He had won many ovations, awards and honours several many art associations, organisations, and private bodies in India. His paintings specially his lines and colours were superb. Towards the end of his life he suffered from heart trouble and died a few years ago before he was 70. Many of his paintings are in the private collections of big industrialists in India. He was a great friend of mine. Nandalal Bose's colour scheme and lines were evident in his paintings.

An artist is a person whose aesthetic acumen is so acute that he discerns something unique or remarkable in the shape and colour of an ordinary thing which strikes an immediate chord of response and inspires him for a new creation, just as the late Satyajit Ray saw something unique in the ordinary life of a mendicant and converted it into a masterpiece of art in his film *Pather Panchali* which immediately received world acclaim. So an artist's conception of beauty is different from that of an ordinary person. Just ordinary beauty as regarded by laymen does not appeal to an artist with creative talent, he seeks for something extraordinary and unique in shape and colour, to inspire him for creation.

I would like to state a few words about the wave of Modernism that sweeps the art activities in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta. Recently I had the good fortune of acting as a

judge for selecting works for the National Exhibition of Art in New Delhi and also previously I had the occasion of seeing several national exhibitions in Calcutta and New Delhi and honestly I admit that many of the works, i.e. paintings, graphics and sculptures seemed fantastic and defy my comprehension completely. I thought, is Dadaism being repeated in India? Paintings look like sculptures in relief, graphic prints like oil paintings or water colour painting and sculptures like jigsaw puzzles. My young artist friends may not agree with me, call me antiquated, old fashioned or obsolete, but like it or not, I have expressed my genuine views. But as for the new generation of Oriya artists, I must say that they have a very bright future. They are really talented and if given proper scope, encouragement, publicity and financial help they will come up at par with the best artists of other states in India. Now in the final analysis of everything, I would like to state the sources that have and are still inspiring me in my creative work. They are varied and change periodically but the few main sources that remain unchanged and haunting my mind ever so often are the graceful and elegant form of a horse with a long swan like neck, long legs and a slim waist, an athletic build like that of a black American fascinates me all the time. A robust farmer, cattle, buffaloes, goats, old gnarled stumps of a tree, a country boat in a river with distant hills, a moonlit night and dusk, create an atmosphere of peace and quietude for me.

Finally I want to state that I am quite optimistic that the future of the artists of Orissa is very bright. The artistic skill and talent that

inspired the Oriya sculptors to create such exquisite carvings on the temple walls of Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark is still flowing in the veins of Oriya sculptors, never to die.



News time *Wood engraving*

A World
Bereft of Beauty

Is it possible for anyone to imagine a world that is bereft of paintings, sculptures, designs or any beautiful articles, like bed covers, screens, carpets, sarees, etc. or thousands and thousands of artistic articles and artefacts? It is impossible to visualise such a world and perhaps it will be impossible for man to live in such a bleak and barren world. Man is different from aninals because of his aesthetic sense and consciousness. He is able to distinguish between beautiful and ugly, and create beautiful things in order to make this world beautiful. Art has made the major contribution to the history, culture, civilisation, tradition and society and I feel that without art this world would not have been worth living in and man would not have been any better than animals. Every landscape, trees, flowers, hills, mountains, birds, animals, human beings, children and sky and the rivers and sea bear testimony to the above statement. The day that this earth was formed, it was endowed with beauty by the divine. There was the blue sky, the mountains, green meadows, beautiful flowers, trees, butterflies, birds and animals. It was a beautiful world before man was born. And when man was born, he came with intelligence and an aesthetic sense to understand and appreciate this beauty.

But he had a diabolical or rather a paradoxical quality to beautify or completely destroy this world. If he could really understand the intention or will of the divine then he could make this world a kingdom of happiness for everyone to live happily. Each and everything is the spark of the Divine and this makes us members of one family irrespective of caste, creed, colour or religion. What a wonderful life this would be if we all try to realise this dream and make it practicable.

When the primitive man looked at this earth for the first time perhaps some millions of years ago he was just overwhelmed and stunned to petrification by the sight of such rich unlimited wealth of beauty all round him in nature. He then fell into a deep meditation. He started giving a serious thought to this matter of creation and asked himself as to who had created this wonderful beauty and for what purpose ? Before the dawn of civilisation when man was living in caves and when the only occupation in his life was to hunt and kill animals for food even at that time he had invented a language to express himself and that language was the language of painting.

The Altamira cave paintings of Spain painted some thirty thousand years ago is the concrete example of man's first language for communicating his ideas to others. Now millions of years have passed, since the first man was born and now he has landed on the moon and exploring the possibilities of landing and living on other celestial bodies and planets climatically suitable for habitation. So now the more and more he probes and unravels the mysteries of

creation, the more he realises that the secret or mystery of creation is unfathomable. There is the abode of the Devil and the Divine both in man and a very thin film separates them. The same man who is the incarnation of kindness in the twinkle of an eye becomes a murderer. How is it possible ? Perhaps deliberately and consciously man destroys millions of his species in a matter of a few minutes. America, England, France, Russia and China want India to sign the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty). But India has boldly and firmly refused to sign it unless the big powers destroy their own arsenal of nuclear weapons. They have accumulated thousands of tons of these formidable weapons of mass destruction so that when the smaller countries stop manufacturing these weapons, the big countries such as America, England and Russia can dominate over the smaller countries and threaten them to do whatever they like. What sort of logic is this? India will not yield to them under any pressure. Can any one comprehend what a chaotic and horrific situation will be created if any of these countries out of a mad or fanatic moment detonates all these weapons at one time ? The whole world will be blown-up 100 times over, not even leaving a splinter as its evidence, behind it. This is a question that is agitating the minds of all the intellectuals in the world.

Now I would like to make some clarification about two terms that are now being used extensively everywhere by artists as well as non-artists. And those two terms are 'Originality' and 'Spontaneity'. We all know to some extent what is meant by 'Originality'. Originality in a

person becomes evident in his conversation, writings, paintings, sculptures, dancing, singing and behaviour. We notice something extraordinary, dynamic and unique in his approach and presentation of subject. That is the identification of his individuality and carries his stamp of originality in everything he does.

To establish his identity or originality, he has to work very hard. In the case of an artist, he has to study hundreds of paintings and sculptures, their different techniques, colour schemes, compositions etc. to improve his knowledge and then develop an original style of his own. Such artists were the late Nandalal Bose, Binod Behari Mukherji, Ramkinkar, Sankho Choudhury, A.N. Saigal and Chintamoni Kar, who had dedicated their lives to establish their identity. Even now there are several artists (painters and sculptors) work hard day and night to achieve recognition.

Now what is spontaneity ? It is like an extempore speech that comes out automatically without any previous preparation. Spontaneous painting and sculpturing was started by 'Dadaists' in Paris, France, Dadaists were no artists, they had no schooling and formal training in an art school. They started this 'Dadaism' as a protest against the Impressionist and Post Impressionists. They argued that if you accept these Impressionist paintings as original and creative then whatever we produce or create, you must accept them as original art. Modern Art recognises originality above everything else. So they bought hundreds and hundreds of meters of canvas, smeared the models with all sorts of

paints and rolled them on the canvas and created hundreds of paintings. just patches and blurrs of colours and not only that, they broke up the chairs and tables in hotels and joining the pieces somehow with cement and other adhesive material, put them up as original compositions. But that movement did not last long, because people soon found out that there was no plan, conception or sincerity behind them. That was just a big hoax. Spontaneity sometimes reduces creations to a junk and trash. So it soon lost its popularity and faded out. Thus, nothing can really last long if it has no sincerity or dedication behind it. Hence, originality is not spontaneity. The two should not be confused. The new millennium has just started and it has thrown up all the intellectuals, artists, musicians, dancers and poets not into a mental exercise but into a mental agony and mayhem.

Recently I visited a few national exhibitions in some of the big cities in India. I was just appalled by what I saw there that were supposedly created in the name of creativity. Paintings, sculptures and graphic art were heaped up like junk piles. I could not make up my mind as to how to classify them under what titles. Sculptures, paintings or graphic arts. Sculptures like jigsaw puzzles, paintings like relief sculptures done with texture whites and plaster of paris on plywood boards and graphic art prints with collage-water colours, printing inks and news papers and magazines cuttings. One artist said that modern art recognises originality above everything else. But does originality mean yielding to fanaticism, vandalism, vulgarity and pornography? Should it

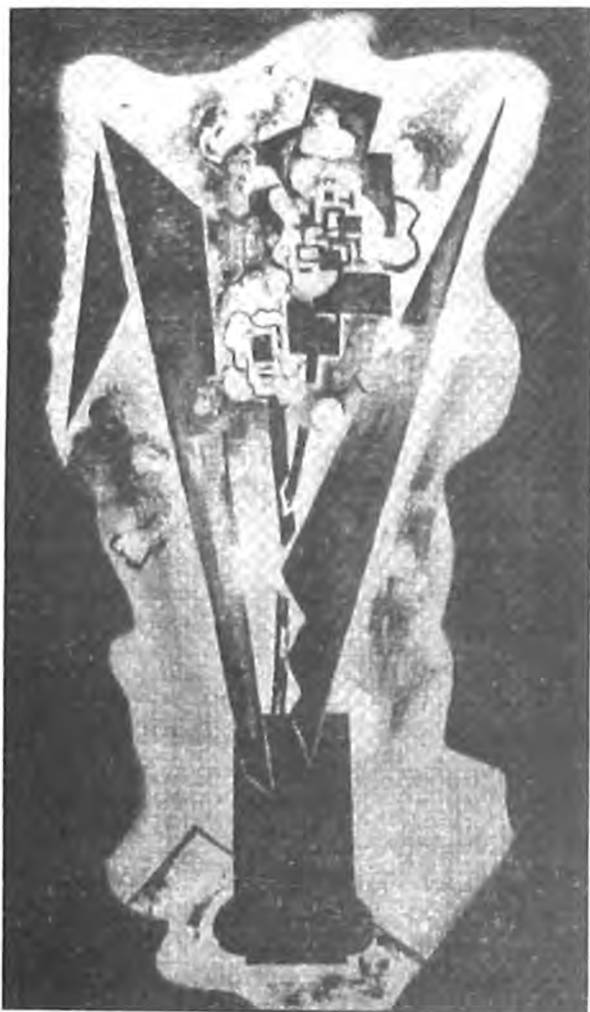
perpetuate pornography and fanaticism. Aesthetically it calls for understanding and appreciation of beauty, not vulgarity. Towards the end of the 19th century, some young artists in France started revolting against the dictates of the academicians and authorities of the institutions. They stated that they would not blindly follow those old, hackneyed rules of anatomical drawings, light and shade, perspective and realistic colours. The transport and communication system had improved and they had come and seen the beautiful paintings of Japan, China and India and the magnificent sculptures of India, Egypt and Africa and had come to realise that art was creation and not an imitation of nature. God has endowed man with intelligence and skill to create new colour schemes, drawings and composition. Man just evolves a new aesthetic vocabulary to express his own particular ideas and conception. So a copy, like spontaneity cannot be regarded as an original piece of work.

The young European artists after returning from these oriental countries completely changed their whole outlook on the technique of painting. They rejected anatomy, light and shade, perspective etc. and concentrated only on colours. The Chinese, Japanese and Indian paintings were comparatively more colourful than the Western paintings, the reason being that when the Western sky remained cloudy and dark, the Eastern oriental sky was always sunny and bright. So naturally the young European painters were drawn towards the brighter paintings of the East. They realised that although there was no

anatomy, light and shade and perspective, yet those paintings looked very attractive with beautiful uniform lines, bright colours, interesting compositions without perspectives. Thus, they realised that art was creation and not an imitation of nature. Whatever impression an artist acquired in his mind of a subject, he should interpret it in his own way with his own colour scheme, which need not be the original colour of the subject. Thus European artists created a revolution in painting. They introduced all sorts of bright colours like red, yellow, blue, orange, etc. It created a commotion amongst the European spectators. They had never seen such bright colours before, and so that is how the first impressionist movement began in 1872, because it expressed the impression of an artist.

But as one revolution gives birth to another revolution, this revolution created another counter revolution "Dadaism" which means 'nonsense' in French. It was started by some people who were not artists and had no formal training in art. They were just fanatics. They began this agitation out of jealousy, because the Impressionists had stolen the limelight. Those 'Dadaists' as they were called started their artistic creations as they called them by breaking up chairs, tables and other furniture in hotels, joining them up with glue or cement and put up some fantastic creations, bought lengths of canvas, smeared the nude models with oil and varnish paints, rolled them up on those canvas, cut them up into small pieces and put them up with their funny sculptures and called them their "new creations." Their

argument was that, if you called the "Impressionist" works original, then whatever the Dadaists created, even if they were fantastic, must be accepted as works of art. But soon people were able to see through this hoax and fanaticism and the movement died a pre-mature death after a short time.



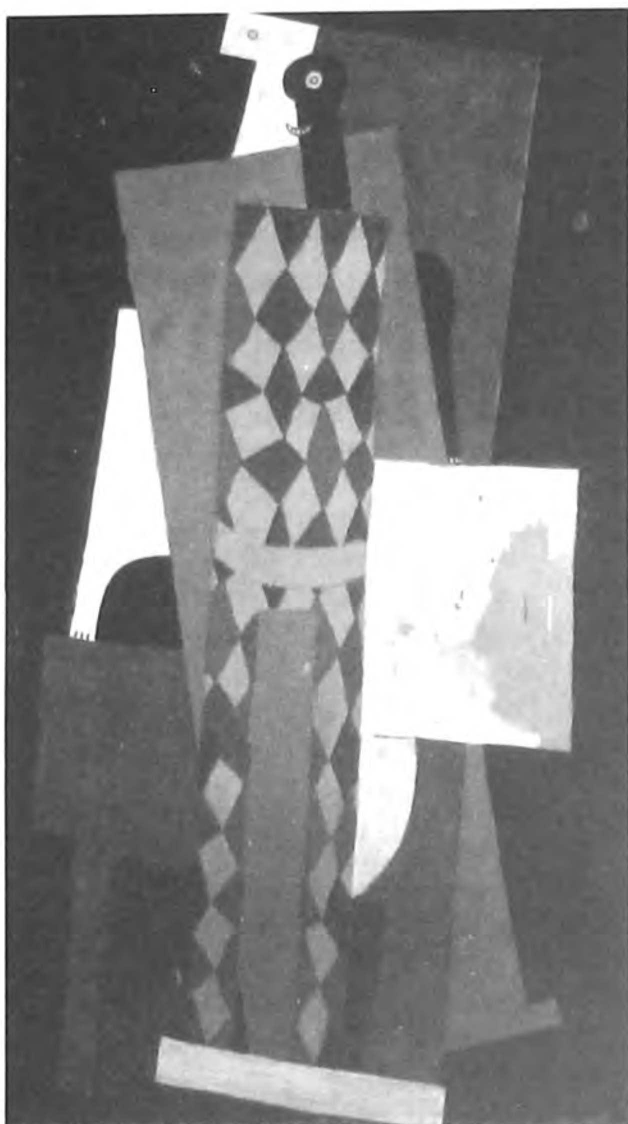
Flower Vase *Oil on Canvas*

Postscript
Ajit Keshary, Me and Others

"Modern art is now, of course, no longer modern. Perhaps it became historical in 1929, when the Museum of Modern Art was founded in New York, or even earlier when the first 'histories' of modern art began to appear in print."

Thirty-three years after modern art got historical, Ajit Keshary painted his first oil, *The Flight* and the painting was destined to be awarded in the "Modern Art Category" of the first annual art exhibition of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi. The following year I too painted an oil, *Harvesting Songs* that won for me an award in the all India exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts at Calcutta.

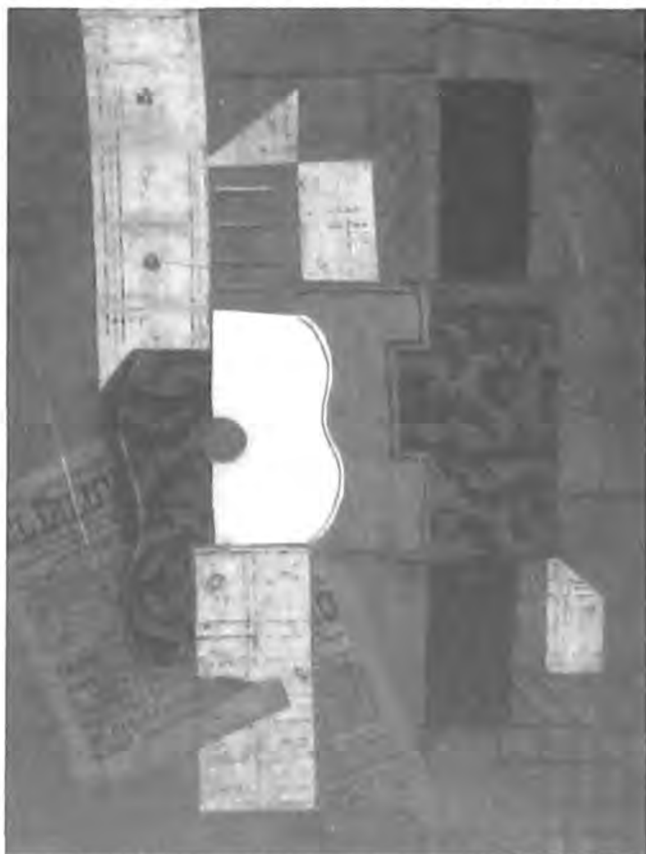
These two works raise several questions of affiliation and influences or of creative relationship. Were they really the first works to be recognised as modern in Orissa ? Were the works a spontaneous outcome of the artists' innovativeness or were these paintings influenced by some known or unknown works ? Did Khallikote, an old-time *zamindari* with a peculiar synthesis of British and native culture, inspire modern paintings when symptoms of modernism were totally absent in her veins ?



Harlequin **Pablo Picasso (1915)**

One is reminded of Matisse and his convictions. It is well-known that Matisse believed his series of goldfish paintings (1914) to have inspired Picasso's Harlequin of 1915, but

the series became itself one of the most significant of Matisse's engagements with cubism, particularly the cubism of George Braque and Picasso. The difference between *Guitar* (1913) *and Goldfish* and *Palette* (1914)



Guitar Pablo Picasso (1913)

are easy to point out : one is a large oil on canvas, and the other a pasted paper collage with various charcoal interventions. But these two paintings which we are discussing in the Orissan context, are of similar dimension and of equal destiny.



Goldfish Matisse (1914)

I bring Pablo Picasso and Henry Matisse to the forefront of the postscript to make a significant point related to modernism in Orissa. These two masters have been inextricably linked to many of the potent innovations in the painting and sculpture of the past 100 years. I recently had an occasion to visit London Tate Modern's monumental new exhibition show on "Matisse-Picasso." This show prompted me to identify contemporary masters of Orissan modern

painting and compare their works. In this context Ajit Keshary surfaced in my mind. I think this small write-up is a befitting bravado to make an emphatic statement. Elsewhere in my other publications, *Oddiyan*, 1997, *The Generation Gap*, 1999, and *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, 2001, I have talked of the Trinity as the precursor of modernism in Orissa, Sarat Chandra Debo, Ajit Keshary Ray and Anant Panda.

I do not intend, nor it is proper to make a bare comparison between the world masters of modernism and our Orissan masters, but to draw the context of modernism in Orissa and value their efforts as first attempts will be relevant. "Modernism emerged under different circumstances in different languages", this Satchidananda defines in relation to literature, "and often meant different things, though its common thrust was anti-romantic and meant an innovation of idiom that was essential to articulate the new perception of life in the context of industrilisation and urbanisation."

If different circumstances and phases of socio-economic factors and even intellectual understanding have meaning in the emergence of modernism, then Khallikote made a mark as the paraphrase of an Indian modern art chronology. At times I feel somewhat hesitant, because a very few, almost none of the modern art historians (do they ?) ever wrote about Orissan contemporary art history and I was part of the movement who only made statements. There is scope to label my impromptu analysis unethical, but the entire 20th century passed without any tangible writings on Orissa's modern/ contemporary art and definitely the attempt

made in *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, 2001 is substantial and laudable. Beginning with Mayadhar Mansingh down to Surendra Maharana, there are more than a dozen books on Orissa's Literary History which give a fair picture of modern writers and their writings. Artists never believed in writing till Ajit Keshary came up with his autobiography, a second attempt in English after Prafulla Mohanti's *My Village My Life*.

Back to Ajit Keshary's first painting *The Flight*, which is an austere investigation of the bare essentials of pictorial representation. Over layering of flying birds whirling around in the open courtyard of the Khallikote palace, watched by the painter from his second floor apartment is the 'baseness' of a statement linked to Picasso's cubistic works. Ajit Keshary gets the thrill of the idea of pigeons flying against a



The Flight Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*

vacant dull blue sky when he intently tries to catch his mood and create a pictorial grammatology of some significance. This of course turned out to be the crux of modernism, not different from a theoretical investigation carried out in the western world to invent cubism.

My painting *The Harvesting Songs*, with an agricultural couple as the central theme, the woman emerging from the leisurely seated male figure making music from a flute is also a theoretical determinant to an extent. But the life force brought out through the lyrical yet forceful concave and convex forms and lines link this to the sensuous world. The delicate fleshy thighs, the slender body and the upraised spontaneous hands result in a musical movement while his woman takes an upright thrust from the forms of man's wear terminating in a draped contour. The concave and convex contours in Ajit Keshary's painting *The Flight* reverberate throughout the canvas with almost resounding musical modes.

Both the paintings harp on an afternoon leisurely mood, relaxing in the aftermath of a descending sun. The square patches in *The Flight* serve as peeping holes into the horizon, could also be palace windows. The dark indigo and blue interludes in the manner of flinging up the interlinked spaces remind the viewer of spatial diffusion in Picasso's *Guitar* (1913) and *Harlequin* (1915).

I was Ajit Keshary's student at Khallikote (1959-63) but not directly working under him in his studio, but belonged to the



Harvesting Songs Dinanath Pathy *oil (1962)*

Department of Oil Painting manned by another brilliant teacher, Anant Panda. Like Ajit Keshary, Ananta Panda was from Kala Bhawan, Visva Bharati, Shantiniketan where teaching of oil painting was a taboo. In those days when Ajit and Anant were students, the spirit of the *Swadeshi* movement was very intense in the atmosphere and Kala Bhawan was

not yet urbanised enough to accept an alien art. This was a paradox that both these teachers untrained in oil painting techniques would in their life be responsible to bring about a revolution in the outlook of the students studying at Khallikote during the early 1960s. Ironically, Ajit Keshary was appointed to teach Indian painting where flat coloured tempera was the thumb rule. None of his direct students barring Akshaya Kumar Das ever took to oil seriously or influenced by modernism when they were students at Khallikote. Akshaya's preference for oil, giving up more laborious line work in the Indian style of painting was due to his illness. Because of health reasons, he developed a folkish style quite late in his career at his native town Dhenkanal.

I had the privilege of being with Ajit Keshary, Ananta Panda and a few other aspiring student colleagues in a homogeneous group for experimenting in modernism. Surprisingly this endeavour remained as a flash in Khallikote, which later died down without significant patronage and enthusiasm among the teachers and students. On the contrary, there was a strong group to oppose anything modern in art and life at Khallikote. Therefore this upsurge remained as a historical anecdote and the authors remained as historical personalities with credit to the trio.

Cubism was at the root of the modern art movement in Orissa. It turned out to be a "Scheme of a theory" to traverse through cubism to be modern. Of course, the manner of colour application in general was Expressionist. Surrealism came much later, surely not in Khallikote.

I don't like to compare myself with Ajit Keshary because I left the college in 1963 and settled down at Bhubaneswar with a government job as an artist in the State Planning Board, which had nothing to do with modern art. When we formed the Working Artists' Association of Orissa at Bhubaneswar in 1969, Ajit Keshary was not with us as a member of the group but he had his heart and soul in our programmes and he visited our shows and praised the members on their commendable performances. There were two parallel streams functioning, one at Khallikote and the other at Bhubaneswar. But one has to accept that the Bhubaneswar attempts had their roots in Khallikote. But it is also equally true that when the movement in Khallikote faded it surfaced with new vigour in Bhubaneswar.

Sarat Chandra Debo, Ajit Keshary Ray and Anant Panda were the Trinity who sincerely believed in modern experiments and their action gave a boost to the movement. Sarat Chandra, who like Ajit Keshary had a stint in London was primarily the inspirer, recognising each and every advance and caring for the new. Sarat Chandra had a cosmopolitan outlook and he viewed the actions as a new beginning in Orissa. He even linked up the initial attempts he made at Chandra Prabhashram, Berhampur with the experiments that were being undertaken under his principalship at Khallikote.

Ajit Keshary took to oil for the first time in his life when Sarat Chandra made a plain and simple comparison between tempera and oil, harping on their similarity to convince Ajit Keshary of the need to move away from the

Shantiniketan mannerism. Ajit Keshary although trained in Shantiniketan had his soul away from the routine Kala Bhawan Art. Therefore, it became instantaneous to appreciate what Sarat Chandra said and still easier for him to fall back upon his London days. "A work of art", Sarat Chandra said, "must carry in itself its complete significance and impose it upon the beholder even before he can identify the subject matter." Perhaps this was what he meant when he said he was always looking for a complete expression for feelings that you can't describe. T.S. Eliot has similar feelings about poetry. He says, "great poetry communicates before it is understood."

Not only in Orissa, but everywhere else in India, cubism took the upper hand to transform the academic painting into modern. This is a surprising phenomenon because much before in the 19th century, the Impressionist movement (1860), New-Impressionism (1880) and even Expressionism (1905) developed techniques and theories of a new art but could not influence the Indian moves. However in Europe these movements brought about a complete revolution in the language of art, taking art from the ateliers and bringing it in direct cntact with nature.

The first two Orissan modern paintings fortunately not only speak about nature but they have been inspired from nature, the vacant sky above the courtyard at Khallikote and the paddy fields with working man and woman in some remote south Orissan country site. Carl Jung is of the opinion that "Consciously or unconsciously, the artist gives form to nature and values of his time, which in their turn form him."

In the Orissan context, modernism started with western influence and it did flow through Ajit Keshary's painted canvases. Soon after *The Flight*, he embarked upon vigorous self-education and delightful experiments, sticking rigidly to the cubism of Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris. His painting *Violinist* is a picked up visual sequence from the series of Picasso's Guitar Paintings done after 1910. Besides Picasso's Harlequins (1915 and 1918) have also made a deep impact on Ajit Keshary.

Ajit Keshary is extremely fond of painting horses. He must have painted more than a dozen canvases with horses prancing and at times in juxtaposed configuration where the movement freezes in tension. Unlike Husain's horses, Ajit Keshary's steeds are wiry, angular with thin stick like legs probing the space around rather than pushing agog with speed. His canvas



Horses Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*

with dishevelled chairs *After the Luncheon Party* has been spaced in imitation of his horse paintings.



After the Luncheon Party Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*

The spatial alignment is similar where he has transformed horses into dining chairs and tables. His quest for geometrical forms does not get satisfied and he extends his search to other

possibilities of showing furniture, ceramics, cutlery, fruits and other still life objects in cubistic patterns. All these canvases are an austere investigation of the bare essentials of pictorial representation.

To speak of the continuation, I would like to add Anant Panda's as well as mine for a comprehensive analysis. Anant Panda's *Family* painting, for which he got an award in the first Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition and his *Labourers* in the collection of the Orissa Lalit Kala



Labourers Anant Panda *oil*

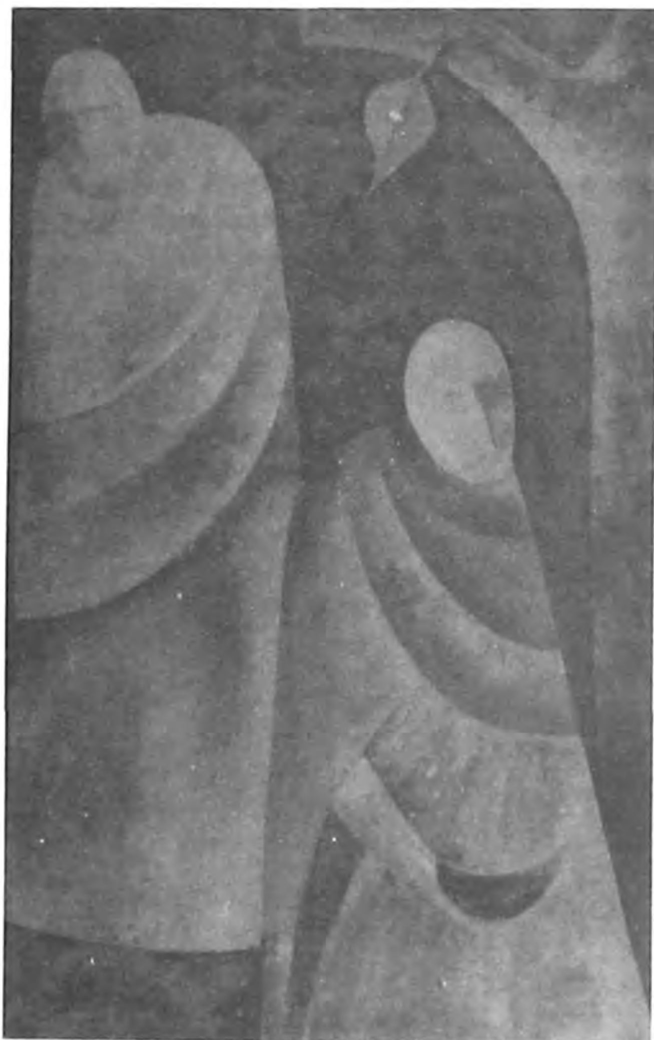
Akademi are set in the modern mode. The forms here show cubic stances but are not so obvious. The bodies, limbs and gestures, more in *Labourers* are in cubistic vents and prepares the artist for a direct encounter with geometrical structurisation.

Anant Panda makes a detour to cubism through the rural sensibility and rich colouration of Amrita Shergil and monumentality of sculptor Ramkinker. The indelible impression of Amrita's dark women figures against shining backgrounds bestow a melancholic mood to his canvases. Since I was initially working under Anant Panda's influence, the general art critic would make meanings of the dark orange and yellow-tinged orange in his *Family* and draw parallels to my *Monks* painted later in Bhubaneswar. Though thematically different, both the canvases project similar colour sensations of bright orange



Family Anant Panda *oil*

and pale yellow. But the striking difference in both the compositions is vital for our understanding. *The Monks* shows the representational language of cubism as if performed on a shoestring budget with



The Monks Dinanath Pathy *oil*

exhilaratingly deep feelings for renunciation and simplicity, whereas his "Family" is a cosy configuration of intimacy.

The family as a theme for painting is quite common with contemporary Orissan painters. Therefore, it was no wonder that Ananta Panda, Ajit Keshary and I have painted a number of canvases with family as a theme. While Anant Panda and Ajit Keshary stuck to their early compositions with colours all over the canvas, I switched over from oil to water colour executing coloured drawings with the help of ink on silk canvas.

I am moving in between Sarat Chandra Debo, Ajit Keshary, Anant Panda and my painterly self to bring out the artistic attempts of those initial years that provided the backdrop of the Orissan modernistic movement. I don't like these subtle nuances of modernism to lose their significance as important landmarks in a vague generalisation of Orissan modernism that might happen to a future generation who would be swept off their feet in an anxiety to be postmodern artists of a global culture in Orissa.

Ranjit Hoskote is right in saying that : (art) experience gains significantly in depth when the viewer is also aware of the personal and historical circumstances in which these artworks were brought into being, the ideological, philosophical and formal concerns they reflect, the art historical moment in which they appeared.

Gopal Chandra Kanungo a contemporary of this group had earlier done a few oils, *Grazing Cows* in an impressionistic colour

application and *Land Scape (My Village)* in expressionistic brushwork. He had a few other tempera paintings executed in cubistic mannerism. Gopal Charan Kanungo was a versatile painter, a fine figurative artist who believed in the handsomeness of the human body. Therefore, he could not go beyond a certain point of distortion and when he did, it became decorative. The spirit of modernism seems to be absent in several experimental works of Gopal Charan Kanungo. In a historical chronology, the paintings of Gopal Charan Kanungo would be mentioned first but these will soon be lost in the intensive search for a new idiom and a new language of art in Orissa.

I would like to emphasise the holding of the first annual art exhibition of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi as an event of significance that documents modern aspirations for a historical chronology. We have already talked of the exhibition in 1962. In the second year in the Modern art category *Human Figures* of Jatin Das in painting medium and *Cactus* in the graphic art section were awarded. Since then, Jatin Das has moved ahead but has still retained his man and woman theme, executing them with various cubic stances and in exaggerated and simplified human anatomy.

Siba Panigrahi's *Three Sisters*, which was awarded in the 1962 exhibition, was an attempt to depart from the academic oil painting. The figures in this painting have globular suggestive faces in a forest ambience reminiscent of Sailoz Mukherjee's works. My own painting, a landscape that was awarded in the 1962 exhibition in the painting category had

been executed in an expressionistic brushwork, showing forceful application. Gopal Charan Kanungo had a gauche painting with the theme of bullock carts crossing a water channel, in the first annual exhibition. It was also an expressionistic work with emphasis on reflections in water. That was also an awarded work. Muralidhar Tali's oil was strictly an



Three Sisters **Siba Panigrahi *oil***

academic work with a colonial hangover. But in later years he turned out to be a successful abstract painter both in oil and watercolour. Bibhuti Kanungo's painting in the first exhibition was a mix of academic and oriental.

Binod Routray's, Gouranga Charan Som's and Chandra Sekhar Rao's works were in conformity with the revivalist style of Shantiniketan. Jyotirmayee Mohanty (Kanungo), Padmanabha Behera, Durga Prasad Das, Udaya Narayan Jena and Shyama Sundara Patnaik were another lot professing the Kala Bhawan style of wash and tempera painting. Out of this group, Chandra Sekhar Rao could have the strength finally to deviate and invent a new style on the lines of Jamini Ray. But this was again a late development in him in the 1980s while his Khallikote works mostly remained revivalistic in temper.

More or less the artists whose works we recognised in both the annual shows of the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi remained art practitioners till late in their life. While artists such as Binod Routray, Durga Prasad Das and Gouranga Charan Som repeated themselves without much innovative zeal of course with fine workmanship and line work, the others like Gopal Charan Kanungo, Muralidhar Tali, Ajit Keshary Ray, Anant Panda, Dinanath Pathy, Jatin Das and Siba Panigrahi who took to oil painting seriously entertained new concepts and experiments. Their works show gradual evolution.

Muralidhar Tali on government assignments and Jatin Das by preference

remained away from the Orissan contemporary art scene and could not contribute significantly to the growth of modernism. The rest of the painters struggled hard to survive as practising artists and contributed to modernism. One wondered how difficult it was to push oneself as a practising artist without support of media, gallery, government and opportunity for sales.

Of all the exhibits displayed in both the annual exhibitions of 1962 and 1963, Ajit Keshary's work *The Flight* stood out distinguished for its new approach and pictorial language.

Ajit Keshary's career as an artist was a gradual unfoldment. It flourished in Khallikote and died down when he shifted to Cuttack in 1980. It seemed as if he lost the pursuit and the ambience of Khallikote. The need was also not there. The spillover at Cuttack did not add any thing significantly new. He almost repeated himself, although he claimed to have continued his quest for the new. Theme-wise he had also chosen quite a few. His collection of paintings gradually getting scattered could be vertically split into three sections. The first group with dominantly application of cubistic formations and ideas like *The Flight, Violinist, Flower Vase, Still Life with Fish in Jar, Sun Flower, After the Lunch, Boats* and *Horses*, and the second group consisting of more figurative works like *Family, Mother and Child, Reclining Woman, Women with Water Pitchers* and the third section with more abstract compositions like *The Shattered Sun, Entwined Forms, Moon, Cyclone* make the totality of his artistic perception, pursuance and personality.



Still Life with Fish in Jar Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*

His human figures are tall, gently muscular and gracefully action-oriented, females are slim, with thick round bosoms and shapely limbs. They are savoury, urbane and project an idea of the beautiful in cubistic classicality. Ajit Keshary is cosmopolitan in spirit with a touch of restricted bohemianism. Throughout his stay in Khallikote, he tried to belong to the soil accompanying his colleague Anant Panda in fishing expeditions to Chilika and bird hunting into the Khallikote hills. I remember his initial days in Khallikote in a spirit of artistic abandon now painting a canvas, now carving a stone and now making a wood cut all in a stride in search of a local vocabulary in his artistic endeavours. He had tried to create an artistic ambience in the old palace, Rama Chandra Bhavan and influence his students to open up and work for modernism. His entire ambition was to imbibe this spirit of the new wave and create a movement for the future Orissa.

His set of remarkable wood engravings done during his London days speaks of the artist's dexterity in handling the media. These compositions rather in tiny formats are free in their expression, but nostalgic in their connotative appeal. These carry in them the reflective mood of Kala Bhawan and technological excellence available in western countries. This group of works, mirrors the inner resonance with delicate abandon. Perhaps this group of works is unique in the history of print making in Orissa and are not to be seen with the younger generation of print makers. In terms of Ajit Keshary's development as an artist, these wood engravings offer a decisive break with both western classicism and eastern revivalism of the immediate preceding years. They, standing as buffer between his days of learning and days of experiment, represent a yearning for the change that was to come later in his artistic personality. Realising their importance as a unique pictorial language in the Orissan context, we have included them in the body of the text.

The following confessional statement by Ajit Keshary on his first painting, *The Flight* reveals the schema of his working process. "I broke up these birds into their simple basic forms, i.e. two tringles for the wings, one tringle for the body and some squares and rectangles for the courtyard in the background." The cubists believe that man is possessed by an urge to objectivate; he wants to "see something" in the work of art which should—and he is sure of this, represents something. His imagination forcefully calls up memory images, but the only ones which present themselves, the only ones

which seem to fit into the straight lines and uniform curves are geometric images. Experience has shown that this "geometric impression" disappears completely as soon as the spectator familiarises himself with the new method of expression and gains in perception. Therefore cubists build their paintings as if they would construct their houses, brick by brick.

Astonishingly he paints the construction of a house which he titles as *Construction* and makes a statement, "*Construction* is an abstract painting with geometrical forms like squares, rectangles, tringles, circles, cones and cylinders. It depicts a house under construction." This bare statement does not add anything new to the visual spectrum available on the canvas but expresses his engagement with cubism. Let us watch another of his statement regarding the third canvas "Rhythm and Depth". He says "Rhythm and Depth" is a complete abstract painting with many interesting curved lines of dark blue, red, light green and white colours.

The above statements quoted from an unpublished write-up, "Influence of Cubism on My Painting" speak of his obsession with cubism and truly so, he remained a cubist throughout his life. His idea of abstraction also emerges from cubistic encounters. In fact, critics would label his so-called abstract paintings as cubic. Cubism, in accordance with its role as both constructive and representational art, brings the forms of the physical world as close as possible to their underlying basic forms. Through connection with these basic forms, upon which all visual and tactile perception is based, cubism provides the clearest elucidation and foundation of all forms.



Construction Ajit Keshary Ray *oil*

The unconscious effort which we have to make with each object of the physical world before we can perceive its form is lessened by a cubic painting, through its demonstration of the relation between these objects and basic forms. Like a skeletal frame, these basic forms underline the impression of the represented object in the final visual result of the painting; they are no longer "seen" but are the basis of the "seen" forms.

About his first experience in London, what he writes with great excitement is nothing but his sole commitment to cubism. Here is the quotation. "There I saw the original paintings of the Impressionist group of painters and also that of the Expressionists, Surrealists, Futurists and Cubists, specially Picasso's. I was most impressed by Picasso's cubic style of paintings. I had never seen such bold lines and colours. For the first time in my life I saw human forms rendered in cubes, squares, rectangles, triangles and circles."

Being for all the prime time of his life in Khallikote, Ajit Keshary couldn't get out of the boredom of the place and the palace, sometimes he felt impatient and expressed his feelings through his paintings which did to a certain extent provide relief to his questing soul. Sarat Chandra, left the school and Ajit Keshary was no good as an administrator. The Principalship ruined his artistic temperament. His relations with Anant Panda were strained. The committed students of modernism passed out of the institution and he was left alone. Anant Panda had a large number of his own oil painting students starting from myself to D.N. Rao, Chandramani Biswal, Ramahari Jena and Ajit Keshary had really none. He had a few selected admirers who wanted to glow or bask in his fame but really did nothing, neither for themselves nor for their teachers.

The new language that grew in Khallikote in the early 1960s gave unprecedented freedom. It is no longer bound to the more or less verisimilar optic image which describes the object from a single view point. From the first award in the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi in the early 1960s to the first award in the Central Lalit Kala Akademi of Ramahari Jena for his oil *Armenia* in the late 1980s the journey is visible. The Orissan masters who have made this visible deserve our accolades.

It is alarming that his collection is dwindling away for paltry bargains. His own family, the artist community and the government are silent witnesses to the erosion of an important collection. It is really pitiable that Ajit Keshary who was responsible to bring



Armenia-88-I Ramahari Jena *oil*

modernism to Orissa is slowly forgotten. While Fakir Mohan and Sachi Routray are read and admired there is no avenue to know Ajit Keshary, appreciate his paintings and value his contribution.

Therefore this small autobiography how much and how little this might reveal will be an important document in the context of modernism, modern art movement and Orissa. This simple, unassuming Oriya artist from an aristocratic

family who had an unfathomable zest for life and art will be ever remembered as the harbinger. I feel proud of being associated with the publication of this valuable document.

Dinanath Pathy

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Artist in younger days (1946)



Artist with wife Geeta after marriage (1947)



With family members during a picnic at Naraj, Cuttack (1940)



Artist with Asian Friends during a cultural programme in London (1949)



Artist with Indian Friend (1950) in London



With students and teachers of the Anglo French Art Centre, London during study tour to Switzerland (1950)



With friends at the MRA headquarters in Coux, Switzerland (1950)



"I had no idea where to my little life boat would drift. But I had an uncontrollable urge to unfold the beauty of life through art."

Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi
Working Artists Association of Orissa